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Post-apartheid mobility and migration on South Africa's urban peripheries

Gautam Makwana

ABSTRACT

Since 1994, South Africa's cities have been reshaped by intense internal migration and cross-border flows. These movements have expanded informal settlements and peripheral townships, exposing the persistence of spatial inequality despite ambitious post-apartheid reforms. Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban illustrate how urban peripheries remain sites of exclusion, where migrants—both domestic and foreign—struggle to secure housing, services, and livelihoods. While state programmes such as RDP housing and settlement upgrading have improved material conditions, they often reproduce inherited divisions by relocating low-income households far from opportunity. Migrants confront additional barriers of documentation, xenophobia, and insecure tenure, leaving them vulnerable to displacement and marginalisation. This paper reviews empirical scholarship on mobility, informality, and urban governance, arguing that prevailing frameworks neglect the lived realities of mobile populations. It calls for participatory, rights-based planning that recognises migration as central to urban transformation and essential to building inclusive South African cities.

Keywords: *Post-Apartheid Urbanism, Internal Migration, Informal Settlements, Cross-Border Migration, Spatial Inequality, Urban Peripheries.*

Introduction

The democratic transition of 1994 marked a profound rupture in South Africa's political and social landscape. Yet, despite the dismantling of apartheid legislation, the spatial imprint of segregation remains deeply embedded in the country's urban form. Cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban continue to exhibit stark divisions between affluent scores and impoverished peripheries (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Ambitious policy frameworks—including the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Urban Development Framework, and the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) sought to redress these inequalities. However, their material effects have

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been uneven, often reproducing inherited hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Turok, 2016).

Urban transformation discourse has emphasised inclusion, empowerment, and growth, but empirical research shows limited impact on the daily lives of the urban poor (Charlton, 2018). Informal settlements, peripheral townships, and transit camps remain characterised by weak infrastructure, insecure tenure, and restricted access to employment. This paper critically reviews scholarship on post-apartheid urban change, focusing on mobility, migration, and informality, and asks whether South Africa's transformation agenda has meaningfully advanced spatial justice and urban citizenship (Harrison, 2006; Lemanski, 2020).

Urban peripheries and historical migration

Apartheid planning deliberately produced peripheral spaces through legislation such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and Pass Laws, which relocated Black, Coloured, and Indian populations away from economic centres (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Although repealed in the early 1990s, these policies left enduring inequalities in land access, transport, and services (Turok & Borel-Saladin, 2016).

Today, peripheral settlements are primary destinations for both internal migrants from provinces such as Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, and cross-border migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi. These migrants are drawn by employment and education opportunities but face long commutes, insecure housing, and exclusion from formal labour markets (Cross, 2006). Informal settlements such as Diepsloot and Dunoon exemplify this dynamic, offering shelter but limited security (Crush & Tawodzera, 2014).

Mobility itself remains marginal in planning thought. Migrants are often framed as temporary, weakening their claims to urban citizenship (Charlton & Kihato, 2006). This raises fundamental questions: whose presence is recognised as legitimate in the city, and whose mobility shapes urban futures?

Internal migration and informal settlements

Internal migration remains one of the most significant drivers of urban change in post-apartheid South Africa. Rural provinces such as Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal continue to send large numbers of young people into metropolitan centres, drawn by the promise of employment, education, and access to services. Yet, for many, the city is not a site of upward mobility but of precarious survival. Recent statistics indicate that approximately 13.1% of South African households reside in informal dwellings, most of them concentrated on the urban periphery (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

Settlements such as Diepsloot in Johannesburg and Monwabisi Park in Cape Town illustrate the lived realities of internal migrants. These spaces are often framed in policy discourse as zones of deprivation, but ethnographic research reveals them as sites of social reproduction and collective negotiation. Migrants rely on kinship ties, informal land arrangements, and community leadership structures to secure housing and basic services (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Informal governance mechanisms—street committees, neighbourhood watch groups, and local associations—play a crucial role in mediating everyday life. However, these practices sit uneasily alongside state approaches that continue to treat informality as temporary, rather than recognising it as a durable feature of the urban landscape (Charlton, 2018).

Government responses have been shaped by the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP), introduced in 2004 under the Breaking New Ground framework. In principle, the UISP represented a shift away from relocation toward in-situ upgrading and participatory planning (Department of Human Settlements, 2004). Yet, implementation has often fallen short. Fiscal constraints, political pressures, and risk-averse bureaucratic cultures have led municipalities to revert to relocation-based solutions, presented as “upgrading” but in practice undermining established social networks (Tissington, 2012, p. 23).

Housing allocation mechanisms further disadvantage migrants. Subsidy systems typically prioritise long-term, formally registered urban residents, rendering recent arrivals invisible within official records. As Marx (2016) notes, this exclusion reinforces entrenched divisions between urban cores and peripheral areas, sustaining a dual-city dynamic in which migrant-driven informal settlements remain disconnected from formal economies and governance structures.

The persistence of informal settlements should therefore be understood not simply as a policy failure but as evidence of a deeper disconnect between official planning frameworks and the adaptive strategies of the urban poor. Migrants’ survival practices—incremental self-building, informal service sharing, and collective negotiation—demonstrate resilience and agency. Yet, without recognition in policy, these strategies remain precarious. Meaningful urban transformation requires sustained engagement with the lived experiences of internal migrants, treating them as legitimate participants in urban life rather than temporary occupants at the margins of the city.

Cross-border migration and xenophobia

The everyday realities of cross-border migrants on South Africa’s urban peripheries reveal a profound tension between constitutional ideals and lived experience. The post-apartheid Constitution extends basic rights and protections to “everyone” within the country’s borders, including access to housing,

healthcare, and due process. Yet, for migrants and asylum seekers from neighbouring states most notably Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, these legal guarantees have seldom translated into stable social or economic conditions (Crush et al., 2013).

Episodes of xenophobic violence underscore the precariousness of migrant life. The outbreaks in 2008 and again in 2015 resulted in deaths, displacement, and widespread destruction of livelihoods. Scholars argue these were not isolated eruptions but symptoms of deeper structural pressures: high unemployment, competition over scarce resources, and the failure of the state to manage local tensions (Neocosmos, 2010). Violence was concentrated in under-served areas such as Alexandra, Khayelitsha, and parts of eThekweni, where housing shortages and contested access to informal economic activities intensified everyday insecurity. In these contexts, migrants were frequently portrayed as economic competitors or illegitimate outsiders, irrespective of their length of residence or legal status (Misago, 2017).

Housing arrangements further entrench migrant marginalisation. Many foreign nationals reside in backyard shacks attached to RDP houses, overcrowded inner-city buildings, abandoned structures, or informal settlements on the urban fringe. These forms of accommodation place migrants beyond the reach of housing allocation mechanisms, social welfare systems, and municipal planning instruments such as Integrated Development Plans (Landau & Freemantle, 2010). Even migrants who have lived and worked in cities for extended periods often remain invisible in local development processes. Exclusion is reinforced by documentation requirements, fragmented migration governance at the municipal level, and limited political willingness to recognise migrants as legitimate members of urban communities (Palmary, 2009).

Civil society organisations-including the Scalabrini Centre, Lawyers for Human Rights, and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA)-have sought to address these gaps by providing legal support, documentation assistance, and advocacy for migrant rights. While these interventions are critical, they cannot compensate for the absence of coherent state responses to migration at the urban scale. Local government engagement is often inconsistent and, at times, openly adversarial, shaped by political narratives that frame migration primarily as a security concern rather than as an issue of urban governance and development (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014).

The cumulative effect is a recurring cycle of displacement, exploitation, and social invisibility. Cross-border migrants remain vulnerable to eviction, rent extraction by landlords, harassment by law enforcement, exclusion from essential services, and periodic eruptions of anti-immigrant violence. In the absence of sustained efforts to incorporate migrants into housing policy, service provision, and participatory planning, post-apartheid urban transformation risks

entrenching a stratified form of urban citizenship in which non-nationals are confined to permanent marginality (Landau, 2014).

More broadly, the failure to integrate migration into urban policy undermines constitutional commitments to dignity and equality and threatens social cohesion in already fragile urban environments. A developmental approach to migration—one that foregrounds rights, participation, and inclusion—remains an urgent but largely unrealised dimension of South Africa’s pursuit of spatial justice and sustainable urban futures.

Housing, displacement, and peripheral inequality

Public housing delivery has been one of the most visible interventions in South Africa’s post-apartheid development project. Following the transition to democracy, the state invested heavily in large-scale housing programmes intended to address long-standing inequalities in access to land and adequate shelter. By 2020, more than four million subsidised housing units had been constructed, largely through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and later policy iterations such as Breaking New Ground (BNG) (Department of Human Settlements, 2020). From a numerical standpoint, this represents a significant achievement. Yet scholars increasingly question whether these gains have translated into meaningful socio-spatial transformation (Harrison et al., 2008).

A recurring critique centres on the location of state-subsidised housing developments. While these projects provide formal dwellings, they are frequently situated on the outer margins of cities, far from employment hubs, well-resourced schools, healthcare facilities, and efficient public transport networks. This pattern has been described as the “suburbanisation of poverty,” whereby low-income households—many of them internal migrants or recent arrivals to the city—are placed in areas that offer shelter but few pathways to economic participation or social inclusion (Charlton & Kihato, 2006).

Housing megaprojects in Gauteng, including Lufhereng and Fleurhof, illustrate these challenges. Conceived as solutions to housing backlogs and informal settlement expansion, these developments have delivered large numbers of units. Yet their connection to the broader urban economy remains weak. Residents often face limited public transport options, long distances to employment centres, and insufficient social infrastructure such as clinics, schools, and recreational facilities (Ziblim & Fatti, 2019). For households without stable incomes or access to private transport, these conditions translate into high mobility costs, extended travel times, and constrained livelihood opportunities, reinforcing rather than alleviating urban poverty.

Concerns have also been raised about how housing is allocated. Persistent reports of corruption, opaque decision-making, and exclusionary criteria have

called into question the fairness of housing distribution processes (Lemanski, 2011). Migrants—both internal and cross-border—are often disadvantaged by documentation requirements, residency thresholds, and discretionary practices exercised by officials. Allocation systems tend to privilege “established” local residents, marginalising mobile populations and deepening inequalities within already peripheral spaces (Charlton, 2018).

These structural shortcomings have given rise to patterns of secondary displacement. In many instances, RDP beneficiaries particularly migrants leave their allocated houses and relocate back to informal settlements or backyard accommodation closer to employment opportunities and urban services (Marx, 2016). Some households informally sell or rent out their subsidised homes, despite policy restrictions, underscoring the gap between housing conceived as a fixed asset and housing understood as part of a broader livelihood strategy. Such practices reflect the mismatch between state planning assumptions of permanence and the flexible, mobility-driven survival strategies of low-income urban residents.

Overall, the limited recognition of migration and mobility within housing policy has produced outcomes that frequently undermine urban inclusion. Treating mobility as a problem to be controlled obscures its role as a defining feature of contemporary urban life in South Africa. Housing strategies that prioritise well-located development, flexibility, and responsiveness to the economic realities of migrant populations are essential if housing is to contribute to spatial justice rather than reproducing inherited patterns of inequality.

Access to services and infrastructure

Although South Africa’s Constitution enshrines a broad set of socio-economic rights—including access to adequate housing, clean water, sanitation, and electricity—the lived reality across many cities reveals persistent and deeply uneven patterns of service provision. Urban infrastructure continues to reflect historic spatial divisions, with affluent and historically white suburbs enjoying reliable, high-quality services, while informal settlements and townships—predominantly inhabited by Black, low-income, and migrant populations—remain systematically underserved (McDonald & Pape, 2002).

In many informal settlements and peripheral neighbourhoods, sanitation conditions remain especially dire. The continued use of the so-called “bucket system” in some areas stands in direct contradiction to constitutional guarantees of dignity, health, and a safe living environment. Access to basic services such as potable water, electricity, and refuse collection is often unreliable or entirely absent. Households may depend on shared communal taps, overcrowded pit latrines, or informal and unsafe electricity connections, exposing residents to heightened risks of illness, fire hazards, and environmental harm (Smith, 2019,

p. 118). These conditions not only threaten physical wellbeing but also reinforce broader patterns of social and economic marginalisation.

Local government planning and service delivery practices frequently deepen these inequalities. Research conducted in metropolitan areas such as Durban and Cape Town shows that municipal investment tends to prioritise formal residential areas, commercial districts, and middle-income developments, while informal settlements and peripheral communities receive limited attention or are excluded altogether (Bond & Dugard, 2008). Infrastructure improvements are often directed toward spaces deemed economically productive or politically strategic, leaving informal areas locked into cycles of neglect and infrastructural decay.

Service delivery reforms introduced under neoliberal cost-recovery frameworks have further intensified exclusion. The rollout of prepaid water and electricity meters, justified in policy terms as promoting efficiency and fiscal sustainability, has placed a disproportionate burden on low-income households. For poor and migrant residents, irregular incomes make it difficult to maintain consistent service access, resulting in frequent disconnections and limited mechanisms for appeal (von Schnitzler, 2008). In contrast to wealthier areas, where billing systems and service provision are relatively stable, peripheral communities are exposed to arbitrary enforcement and ongoing insecurity.

Migrants are among those most severely affected by these dynamics. Individuals lacking formal documentation, proof of residence, or stable employment often find themselves excluded from official service provision channels. Language barriers, limited awareness of legal rights, and institutional discrimination further restrict their ability to challenge exclusion, lodge complaints, or participate in local decision-making processes (Landau, 2006). The outcome is a form of infrastructural exclusion that mirrors older systems of racialised inequality, reproducing segregation through administrative and technical mechanisms rather than overt legal controls.

Fear also plays a significant role in shaping access to services. Undocumented migrants, in particular, may avoid asserting their rights due to concerns about eviction, deportation, or exposure to xenophobic violence. This anxiety is especially acute in informal settlements, where police raids and anti-immigrant attacks are recurrent threats (Crush et al., 2013). As a result, many migrants rely on precarious survival strategies—such as informal service sharing, overcrowded living arrangements or bribery—that further compromise safety and wellbeing.

Taken together, these conditions have turned many urban peripheries into spaces of infrastructural abandonment, where the promise of urban citizenship remains largely unrealised. Such patterns not only undermine the state's developmental objectives but also carry serious implications for public health, social cohesion, and long-term urban sustainability. Without a fundamental recalibration of

policy to address the structural barriers confronting low-income and migrant populations, service provision will continue to replicate the spatial inequalities inherited from apartheid rather than dismantle them.

Participatory governance and policy gaps

Post-apartheid local governance in South Africa is formally anchored in democratic principles that emphasise public participation and inclusive decision-making. Institutional mechanisms such as ward committees, community development forums, and the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) process were established to encourage grassroots involvement in municipal planning and to ensure that local priorities inform state action. The Municipal Systems Act (2000) legally obliges municipalities to facilitate public participation, reflecting a broader constitutional commitment to participatory democracy. Yet, despite this progressive framework, participation often remains procedural rather than substantive, functioning more as a formal requirement than a meaningful avenue for popular influence (Oldfield, 2008).

Studies of ward committees and IDP consultations reveal persistent shortcomings in how participation is practiced. These spaces are frequently characterised by low levels of engagement, limited transparency, and domination by political or social elites. Meetings are commonly scheduled at times or held in venues that exclude working-class residents, while consultation processes tend to privilege formally constituted organisations over informal or loosely organised groups (Cornwall, 2004). Consequently, residents of informal settlements and peripheral townships—those most directly affected by decisions on housing, infrastructure, and service delivery—are often absent from or marginalised within these forums.

Migrants are particularly disadvantaged within participatory governance structures. Cross-border migrants, especially those without regularised legal status, are effectively excluded altogether, while internal migrants frequently encounter barriers related to informal housing arrangements, lack of documentation, or exclusion from municipal records. This marginalisation is not simply an administrative oversight but reflects deeper structural assumptions about who qualifies as a legitimate urban subject. In practice, participatory governance often reproduces exclusionary patterns by recognising only those residents who fit into formal categories of permanence and tenure.

The result is a governance system that struggles to engage with the realities of mobility and informality. Migrants and residents of peripheral settlements remain invisible in planning processes, even though they are among the most affected by decisions regarding housing, infrastructure, and service delivery. This disconnect undermines the democratic promise of post-apartheid governance and perpetuates the invisibility of mobile populations.

For participatory governance to contribute meaningfully to urban transformation, it must move beyond procedural compliance and embrace substantive inclusion. This requires recognising migrants and informal residents as legitimate urban actors, adapting consultation mechanisms to their realities, and ensuring that grassroots voices shape policy outcomes. Without such recalibration, participatory structures risk reinforcing rather than dismantling inherited inequalities.

Discussion

Across the preceding sections, a recurring theme emerges: mobility is central to South Africa's urban life, yet it remains marginal in policy frameworks. Internal migrants and foreign nationals sustain informal economies, build social networks, and contribute to the vibrancy of peripheral settlements. However, their presence is often framed as temporary or illegitimate, weakening claims to urban citizenship and access to services (Charlton & Kihato, 2006).

State interventions whether in housing, service delivery, or participatory governance frequently reproduce inequality by privileging permanence and formal tenure. Subsidised housing projects, while numerically impressive, often relocate low-income households to distant peripheries, reinforcing the "suburbanisation of poverty" (Charlton & Kihato, 2006). Service delivery reforms, such as prepaid meters, disproportionately burden poor and migrant households (von Schnitzler, 2008). Participatory governance structures, though progressive in principle, exclude migrants and informal residents through procedural barriers (Oldfield, 2008).

Civil society organisations have attempted to fill these gaps, providing legal support, advocacy, and documentation assistance. Yet their efforts cannot substitute for coherent state engagement. Without integration of migration into urban policy, constitutional commitments to dignity and equality remain unrealised.

The discussion therefore points to a fundamental recalibration: urban transformation must embrace mobility as a defining feature of contemporary life. Planning frameworks should move beyond technocratic delivery to rights-based, participatory approaches that recognise migrants as legitimate urban actors. Only then can South Africa's cities begin to dismantle inherited inequalities and build inclusive futures.

Conclusion

Post-apartheid South Africa has made significant strides in housing delivery, infrastructure expansion, and participatory governance. Yet spatial justice remains elusive. Informal settlements and peripheral townships continue to absorb mobile populations, while policy frameworks neglect their adaptive

strategies. Cross-border migrants face xenophobia and exclusion, undermining constitutional ideals of dignity and equality.

To build inclusive cities, urban planning must embrace mobility as a defining feature of contemporary life. Participatory, rights-based frameworks that integrate migrants into housing, services, and governance are essential. Without sustained engagement with the lived realities of mobile populations, attempts to build more just and inclusive South African cities will remain fragmented and incomplete.

Previous dissemination

This work has not been previously published or presented at conferences. The manuscript is original and has been prepared specifically for journal publication.

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The manuscript has been written in English. The author has made every effort to ensure clarity and readability. The manuscript includes a full English abstract, a complete Portuguese resumo, and a Spanish resumen as required for Ibero American readership.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

In compliance with the journal's ethical standards and transparency requirements, the author declares the following regarding the use of AI tools:

1. No AI tools were used for data collection, data analysis, literature synthesis, or any other research activity.
2. No generative AI tools (including but not limited to ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini, Copilot, or similar) were used to refine, correct, translate, format, or edit the manuscript text. The manuscript was written, revised, and formatted entirely by the author.

3. The entire work, from conceptualisation to final editing, was conducted independently by the human author. No AI based diagramming or design tools were used.
4. No bibliometric software (e.g., VOSviewer, CiteSpace) was used in this study, as the methodology is qualitative comparative case analysis and discourse analysis, not bibliometric analysis.

Declarations

Author contributions: The author contributed substantially to this study. The author had full access to all data and information used in the research. The author independently conceptualized and designed the study, conducted a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, and led the analysis and discussion. The author is solely responsible for the content of the final manuscript and has reviewed and approved it in its entirety.

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Consent to participate: Not applicable. The study did not involve the direct participation of human subjects; all analyzed data were publicly accessible or previously published.

Data availability: All data used in this study are derived from publicly available sources, including peer-reviewed journals, academic dissertations, government reports, and NGO publications, as detailed in the References section. No new datasets were generated or analyzed for this study.

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Reconstructing identity and institutional integration: a study of displaced persons of Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir of 1947

Shreeya Bakshi & Ajay Kumar

ABSTRACT

Independence of India was shortly followed by Pakistani attack on the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The attack was so brutal and heinous that it forced the people to displace from their habitual place of residence for their safety. It not only left scars on the collective memory of the displaced persons of Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir for decades together but also tended to shatter the identity of the displaced community as a whole. The delayed administrative policies and discriminatory state laws further created societal inequilibrium for displaced persons. Therefore, the present paper attempts to understand the violence faced by the displaced persons, at the hands of Pakistani invaders. It also seeks to understand the issues and challenges faced by them along with the entire process of reconstructing their identity and institutional integration through various rehabilitation policies which attempted to re-integrate Displaced Persons.

Keywords: *Displaced Persons, Identity, Jammu and Kashmir, POJK, Rehabilitation.*

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir was the largest princely state at the time of independence of India ruled by Maharaja Hari Singh. The state had four main regions namely Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh and Gilgit with total geographic area of 222236 square kilometres which was roughly double the size of Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg put together. The state of Jammu and Kashmir was strategically significant because of its geo-strategic location. To its north lies the Wakhan corridor that connects Afghanistan with China's Xinjiang region. To the north of this narrow corridor lies Tajikistan. To the east and north is Tibet. To the south lies Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. To the southwest lies North West Frontier Province (Bajwa, 2004).

Before the independence of India there were unfathomable chaos, confusion, violence, displacement and sufferings all around when partition of British India was announced in June 1947. The scars of that chaos are one of the tragic

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legacies of the partition of British India into two dominions- India and Pakistan that was announced by Lord Mountbatten on 3rd day of June, 1947 also called as 3rd June plan. The India Independence Act (1947) made the provision for the setting up of two independent Dominions as from 15th day of August, 1947. Upon the lapse of paramountcy, the rulers of the princely states were given the choice to accede to either of the two Dominions as per their own interest subject to their geographic contiguity with any of the Dominion.

After announcing 3rd June plan, when Lord Mountbatten was discussing the policy of accession of Indian States to one Dominion or the other, he became particularly concerned about the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the Indian Independence Act 1947, it was entirely left to the wisdom of the rulers of the princely state to accede to either of the two dominions. So, many people tried to meet Maharaja Hari Singh- the then ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to influence his decision regarding accession. Though Maharaja was continuously in touch with concerned authorities in Delhi through his Prime Ministers regarding the issue of accession but in the meantime, he sent a standstill agreement to both India and Pakistan through telegram. In response to the telegram of August 12, 1947 from the Prime Minister of Jammu & Kashmir on behalf of Maharaja Hari Singh, Pakistan agreed to enter into a *Standstill Agreement* with it with effect from August 15, 1947 where as India sought some clarifications and asked for more time (Jagmohan, 1993). As a result of the agreement, Pakistan promised to continue the existing arrangements by which the State imported essential wheat, cloth, ammunition, kerosene oil, petrol from West Punjab. But these relations with Pakistan deteriorated very soon with the communal rioting in whole of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province (Prasad and Pal, 1987).

Desperate Pakistan invaded Jammu and Kashmir in October, 1947. There was a chronology of events that took place in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir during this invasion. This invasion was purely communal in nature and affected different regions Jammu and Kashmir one after another. The Hindu-Sikh population of the affected regions became victim to this communal violence. There were many incidents of Pakistani atrocities in terms of mass killings, loot, and arson which forced people to flee from their habitual residences to safer zones. The forced displacement and further rehabilitation was not easy for these DPs. The state laws and policies also marginalised them for decades to come. Therefore, the paper attempts to understand the violence faced by POJK DP community, the issues and challenges they faced during entire process of reconstructing their identity and institutional/structural integration.

Analytical framework

Structural functionalism and Social Constructivism in Diaspora Studies are the two theoretical approaches that are used to understand the entire incident of in

1947 with regard to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Structural functionalism is applied to POJK DPs focusing on viewing the POJK DPs community as a social system and explains how the structural disruptions like forced displacement and delayed administrative policies created societal inequilibrium for decades among the people of POJK DPs community. This perspective assessed how the state sponsored institutions attempted to re-integrate DPs in to broader socio-economic fabric of the state through its rehabilitation policies.

Social Constructivism in Diaspora Studies is a framework that examines how community identity, social meaning and historical memory are actively constructed and preserved by the members of a community across generations. Therefore, in this paper, this perspective is used to understand that how POJK DPs construct their identity in terms of Pahari ethnic group anchored in their cultural roots and how they perceive the social meaning of being a displaced community. Along with this, through constructivism it analyses that how through oral histories, sense of belongingness, displacement trauma and cultural ethos are being transferred from one generation to another.

Jammu and Kashmir invaded under *Operation Gulmarg*

Pakistan invaded the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in October, 1947 through Muzaffarabad with the single agenda of forcibly occupying it. The invasion was planned and launched by the Pakistani Army and given code name *Operation Gulmarg*. The day for final attack was decided as 22nd of October, 1947. In the early morning of 22nd October, the raiders comprised of Pakistani Army regulars, tribal afridis, wazirs, mashuds, Swatis crossed the frontier from Garhi Habibullah and attacked Muzaffarabad and Domel (Prasad and Pal, 1987.) The invasion was launched under the command of Major Khurshid Anwar and Khan Rahim Dar Salar. The invaders were joined by the deserters from state forces who provided the strategic details invaders needed. Muzaffarabad witnessed large scale killings of Hindus and Sikhs, loot, arson and rapes of non-Muslim women by the invaders. Later Major Khurshid was blamed of being more concerned with gathering loot than reaching Srinagar. He was dismissed and in his place Colonel Akbar Khan was appointed as the new chief under the code name *General Tariq*. Colonel Akbar Khan was relieved in February 1948 and Colonel Sher Khan was given the charge. Later he again rejoined and stayed until the ceasefire took place in 1949 (Tamiri, 2023).

The dark morning of 22nd October, 1947 in Muzaffarabad

The first attack was launched on Muzaffarabad district of Kashmir province on the mid-night of 21st October, followed by a morning of 22nd October, 1947 which will always remain dark in the history of Jammu and Kashmir as that was the morning the valley wept and bled. Around 5,000 armed men with rifles, brenguns, mortars and grenades crossed the border and fell upon the Hindu-Sikh

inhabitants of Muzaffarabad, created havoc by looting and burning their houses and bazars with the aim of cleansing of non-Muslim population. On the morning of 24th October, 1947 Domel fell due to treachery of the Muslims in the State forces. The non-Muslim inhabitants of Domel were massacred. The Wazir-i-Wazarat of Muzaffarabad Mehta Duni Chnad was also shot dead by the raiders and his family was later captured by the raiders at Domel. About 6000 Hindus and Sikhs were captured by the raiders (Vaid, 2002). The raiders embarked upon murder and loot of the 4000-5000 Sikhs and Hindus in the rural areas of Muzaffarabad. More than 1600 women were abducted to save their dignity many jumped in Kishenganga River, and even ended their lives by consuming poison. Rest of the few who could save their lives rushed to Jammu. After the sack of Muzaffarabad, the raiders pushed a large force of armed men in buses & Lorries towards Srinagar.

Savagery, brutality and wounds of Baramulla: 27th October, 1947

The havoc raiders wrecked on Baramulla will haunt the collective psyche of the people of Baramulla for generations to come. Baramulla had a mixed community of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs with a small population of Christian missionary. Raiders entered the prosperous town of Baramulla in the evening of 26th October, 1947 and engaged in plunder and rape. The looters were however absolutely indiscriminate in execution of their barbaric objective. Hindus and Sikhs were hunted down and killed; their houses were looted and then burnt. Young women were forcibly abducted and carried off without distinction of caste, colour or creed to be sold like cattle in the streets of Rawalpindi and Peshawar, or to live and die as slaves in the mountains fastnesses of the distant tribal territory (Prasad and Pal, 1987). A group of raiders scaled the walls of Saint Joseph's Franciscan Convent Compound and stormed its hospital as well as the church. Twenty-four hours after the Indian Army entered Baramulla, only 1000 were left out of 14000 people. The surviving residents estimated that 3000 inhabitants including four Europeans, and a retired British Army officer, Colonel Dykes and his pregnant wife were shot dead (Singh, 2020). In the St. Joseph Convent, the Mother Superior Sister Taressline and her four 'Sisters of Mercy' were raped and killed. The nurses who rushed out to save patients in the Mission hospital, drew the wrath of the invaders and were killed after being raped.

The carnage of Rajouri: 10th November, 1947

In 1947, Rajouri had population of 4000, many of whom were rich businessmen. By November it rose up to 12,000 as Hindus and Sikhs from adjoining areas sought shelter at Rajouri considering it as safer zone but Rajouri was on the radar of raiders. It was attacked and taken over by the raiders in the middle of November. Plundering started on 10th of November, 1947 and ended on 12th of April, 1948. During these four months of occupation, the raiders indulged in brutal mass killings, loot and arson. Women were raped and abducted and to

save themselves from these atrocities they were compelled for Johar. When Pakistani raiders heard of advance of Indian troops towards Rajouri in April 1948, they collected thousands of civilians near the present airfield and massacred them. The city of Rajouri itself was half burnt, with half the survivors of the holocaust who sought refuge in the hills (Vaid, 2002). On 12th April, 1948 Rajouri was liberated by Indian Army. Even today every year 13th April is celebrated as Rajouri Day and Diwali is observed as Balidan Diwas to commemorate the supreme sacrifices made by people of Rajouri in those horrible four months.

The fall of Mirpur: 25th November, 1947

On 14th August, 1947, Muslims of Mirpur city hoisted Pakistani flag on their homes, shops and mosques to celebrate Pakistan's independence. Next day, on 15th August, Hindus and Sikhs hoisted India's tricolor on their shops, homes, temples, Gurudwara and Government offices to celebrate India's independence. Tension started growing between Muslims and Hindu-Sikhs. In September the Muslims of Mirpur deserted their homes and shops. Some Muslims who had good intention warned their Hindu friends about the upcoming attacks by Pakistanis. They advised them to leave Mirpur for safer places (Gupta, 2012). The raiders attacked Mirpur on 25th November, 1947. At that time, Mirpur had a total Population of 15000 and it was swollen up to 25000 because people from surroundings took shelter at Mirpur considering it safe. A battalion of Pakistan forces attacked Mirpur city in great strength on the night of 25th-26th November 1947. By 25th November they had surrounded the Mangla fort and sealed all the withdrawal routes. They blew the gate of the fort and the front wall. Approx. 2500 people were killed in the infernos that erupted due to Pakistani artillery fire in Arya Samaj Mandir and Pandhi Middle School where many people had taken shelter. Next morning by 10 O'clock, the whole western Mirpur was reduced to ashes & merely in 48 hours, approximately 10,000-12,000 Hindus and Sikhs were slaughtered. Approximately, 2500 escaped with the retreating Jammu and Kashmir Army. And the remaining 20,000 were marched in a procession towards Alibeg. Along the way, Pakistani troops killed about 10,000 of the captured Hindu and Sikh men and kidnapped over 5,000 women. In January 1948, the Red Cross rescued 1,600 of the survivors from Alibeg. Between 1948 and 1954, around 1,000 abducted Hindu and Sikh women were recovered from Pakistan and POJK (Gupta, 2012).

Trail of blood and destruction in Poonch

Poonch was a Jagir of Jammu and Kashmir ruled by its own Raja, subject to the overall sovereignty of the State government. It is situated at the confluence of Suran and Bater rivers with hills on all sides. The inhabitants of Poonch were predominately Gujjars. The troubles flared up at a tehsil Bagh of Poonch Jagir for the first time in mid of October 1947. At Poonch, the Civil Administration

was functioning smoothly till the end of October 1947 but the situation changed suddenly when the outposts of the state forces at Plandri, Bagh, Rawlakote, Sundhnoti, Hajira and Madarpur and other places fell one by one. The raiders by 13 November 1947 occupied the heights surrounding the town of Poonch. The Mendhar and Poonch sector remained the scene of raiders' activity right upto the middle of December 1947. The defence of Poonch which held out for three months will go down in the history as one of the most outstanding achievements of the Indian Army and Air Force (Thakur, 2000; Vaid, 2002).

Gendered cost of ferocity

Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) in their studies on partition provide rare insight into the lived experiences of women caught in conflict and gender politics of partition. They set out to uncover the violence of the event from the perspective of women who lived it, whether they were abducted, rendered destitute, recovered, widowed, rehabilitated or were from more privileged positions and worked with women in refugees' camps. This shows the vulnerability of women during wars and conflicts and how they become target of revenge. Gender as a category of analysis then becomes important. In the same vein, during the Pakistani invasion on Jammu and Kashmir, women were the worst sufferers who were kidnapped, raped, forcefully converted, married and even sold. In Muzaffarabad, Pakistani invaders abducted thousands of women and young girls who were taken in vehicles to Pakistan. Among these abducted women, nearly three hundred teenage girls were told that they would be temporarily shifted to refugee camps in Pakistan before their repatriation to India. The helpless girls sensed the plot and jumped into Kishanganga river. Many of them were saved and taken to Pakistan. These kidnapped girls were forcefully converted and were compelled to marry local men (Tamiri, 2023). In order to save their dignity at the hands of the Pakistani raiders, women were compelled:

- for *Johar*- compulsion of tragedy to preserve their honour
- to end their lives by jumping into Kishenganga river.
- to jump into wells
- to consume poison

Many women were raped in front of their family members, their bodies were mutilated, breasts were cut even bellies of pregnant women were ripped open. There were several unspeakable atrocities done to women in this holocaust.

Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India

Maharaja Hari Singh tried to approach the Government of Dominion of India for accession many times through his Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister but every time Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru put forth the condition of handing over power to Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah who was in jail at that time. But when

Pakistan invaded the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, Maharaja agreed to all the conditions of Nehru to save its people and territory from Pakistani aggression. He signed the Instrument of Accession on 26th day of October, 1947 with the Dominion of India. Lord Mountbatten, the Governor General of India accepted the same on 27th day of October, 1947 (Jammu Kashmir Study Centre, 2016). V. P. Menon obtained the formal accession signed by Maharaja with an agreement that Sheikh Abdullah would carry the responsibilities in this emergency with Mehr Chand Mahajan, the then Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. It was only after formal accession that the first contingent of Indian Army consisting of 1st Battalion of the Sikh Regiment landed at Srinagar airfield on the morning of 27th of October, 1947 (Palit, 1972). On 30th of October, 1947, Maharaja as agreed appointed Sheikh Abdullah as the Emergency Administrator and later on he was appointed as the first Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir State.

Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir and displaced persons

The UN-mandated ceasefire was declared effective on January 1st, 1949 which was followed by the establishment of Ceasefire Line between India and Pakistan on 27th July 1949. The State of Jammu and Kashmir was divided across this ceasefire line. Pakistan gained illegal control over the areas of Mirpur, Muzaffarabad, Gilgit, Baltistan and four tehsils of Poonch district called as Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK). The territory of Mirpur, Muzaffarabad and Poonch under Pakistan illegal occupation has an area of 13297 sq kms. While Gilgit-Baltistan has an area of 64817 sq kms. To save their innocent lives from the barbaric atrocities of Pakistani raiders, a large numbers of Hindus and Sikhs residing in Mirpur, Muzaffarabad and Poonch and adjoining areas had no other option than to flee from their habitual residence to safer zones in Jammu and other states of India. These uprooted people from POJK are called as POJK Displaced Persons of 1947 (Kumar, 2024). Once displaced these displaced persons (DPs) could never return back to their native lands ever. These POJK Displaced Persons are the first and real victims of Jammu and Kashmir. The forced displacement brought untold miseries and sufferings to them in their subsequent rehabilitation process.

Rehabilitation and assistance by the Government

The displacement has not only affected the history and geography but has ruined the overall lives of POJK Displaced Persons of 1947. After getting displaced from their original homeland, they were given temporary shelter in relief camps established at Nagrota, Chatha, Comany Bagh and Frash Khanna in Jammu and Yol Camp in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, Chinari and Hastinapur in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. In these camps, they were provided with immediate relief and later they were settled in different areas of Jammu and other states of India. Since, then they have been the victims of negligence of the successive

Governments. Though, the Government of India sanctioned different relief and rehabilitation packages for these Displaced Persons but that were adhoc and inadequate to cater their needs (Bakshi & Kumar, 2020). There was another category of Displaced Persons who lived outside the camps and managed at their own.

In order to mitigate the hardships of POJK DPs, Government of India decided to provide them ex-gratia/rehabilitation assistance to the displaced persons of POJK. The sanction for payment was issued by the Government on 24th June, 1960 and the formal registration was commenced in 1960 and extended till 7th August, 1962. A total of 31,619 families were registered for financial assistance purpose and 9500 cases of the families were rejected due to various shortfalls. Thus, a total of 41,119 families were recognized at that point of time. Out of 31,619 registered families, 26,319 are living within the territorial boundaries of Jammu and Kashmir whereas 5300 families are residing outside the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in different States (Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs [DPRSC], (183), 2014). They have been the worst sufferers because of the politics of exclusion by the State Government under the provisions of state laws and article 35 of the Constitution of India. Majority of these 26,319 families residing within Jammu and Kashmir are located in Jammu, Udhampur, Kathua, Samba, Reasi, Poonch and Rajouri districts of Jammu province. Out of 26,319 families, around 22,719 families are located in rural areas, whereas 3,600 families are located in urban areas of Jammu province (Wadhwa, 2007). It would not be wrong to say that there would have been many other families who could not even register due to prevailing circumstances. After their forced displacement from POJK, the life was never easy for these displaced persons. They had to start from scratch for their livelihood and even to fulfill their basic needs for survival.

Relief and rehabilitation assistance to POJK displaced persons:

The Government provided assistance to both the categories of POJK DPs-rural as well as urban settlers in Jammu and Kashmir.

Assistance to rural settlers

- (i) Allotment of 2-3 acres of irrigated land or 4-6 acres of un-irrigated land per family;
- (ii) Rs. 1000/- per family was given as ex-gratia payment;
- (iii) For the State land allotted, ownership rights were conferred on allottees in 1965;
- (iv) For evacuee land allotted, the State Govt. has stated that occupancy tenancy rights were given under the Agrarian Reforms Act, 1975;
- (v) 46 Basties constructed by rural settlers on their own were regularized (Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee [DPRSC], Report (183), 2014).

Assistance to urban settlers

The Displaced families who settled in urban areas were provided the following assistance:

- (i) Ex-gratia cash payment of Rs. 3500/- per family;
- (ii) 1628 residential quarters were constructed and allotted by the Government of Jammu & Kashmir in Bakshi Nagar (Jammu), Udhampur and Nowshera and Rajouri. But the cost of the structure was deducted from the ex-gratia grant of Rs. 3500/- per family.
- (iii) In 793 cases, plots were also allotted to them by the State Housing Board free of cost (Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee [DPRSC], Report (183), 2014).

Details of quarters and plots allotted to POJK DPs in J&K

Table 1: Details of quarters and plots allotted to POJK DPs in J&K

S. No.	Name of the Colony	No. of Quarters Allotted	No. of Plots Allotted
1.	Bakshi Nagar Colony, Jammu	1450	629
2.	Nowshera	50	Nil
3.	Udhampur	100	02
4.	Rajouri	28	Nil
5.	Natipora Srinagar	Nil	42
6.	Housing Colony at Patoli, Jammu	Nil	120
Total		1628	793

Source: Wadwa Committee Report, 2007

Rehabilitation packaged sanctioned in 2000

The rehabilitation package sanctioned by Govt. of India in 2000 comprised of the following:

- (i) Ex-gratia payment of ₹ 25,000/- per family;
- (ii) Payment of cash compensation for of land deficiency @ ₹ 5,000/- per kanal subject to maximum limit of ₹ 25,000/- per family;
- (iii) An amount of ₹ 2 crore to be provided for the allotment of plots to those Displaced persons who have already been settled in urban areas of J&K and who have not been allotted plots in the past;
- (iv) ₹ 25 lakh to be provided to the state government of J&K for improvement of civic amenities in 46 regularized colonies (Order No. 33/2/97-Settlement (Vol. IV), Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Rehabilitation Division, Dated, 9th August, 2000).

Rehabilitation packaged sanctioned in 2008

In the year 2008, Government of India sanctioned ₹ 49 crore to the Government of J&K for providing cash compensation in lieu of land deficiency by increasing the amount from ₹ 5,000/- per kanal to ₹ 25,000/- per kanal subject to a ceiling of ₹ 1.5 lakh per family and ₹ 2 lakh to be provided in lieu of plots to the urban settlers, who have not been allotted plots in urban areas. (Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee (DPRSC), Report (183), 2014).

Disbursement made by the State Government

From March 2002 to March, 2004 an amount of ₹ 6.17 crores was released to the Government of J&K for providing relief assistance to DPs from POJK for implementation of the relief package announced in 2000. In 2008, on the recommendation of the State Government of J&K, an amount of ₹ 49 crore was released to the State Govt. It was also informed that out of ₹ 55.17 crore released so far, 2550 families have received the cash compensation to the tune of ₹ 31.07 crore.

As per the scheme the following disbursement has been made by the State Government till September, 2014:

- (i) **Ex-gratia payment of ₹ 25,000 per family:** Out of 1011 applications received and verified, 1010 applications have been rejected and only one reimbursement has been made. As reported by the State Government the verifying committee has rejected 1010 applications on the ground that their monthly income was more than Rs. 300 per month at the time of migration and in many cases only application forms were received without the supporting documents;
- (ii) **Cash compensation in lieu of land deficiency @ Rs. 5000 per kanal which is now revised to Rs. 25,000 per kanal subject to a maximum of ₹ 1.5 lakh per family:** The Committee was informed that out of 4988 claims received, 3948 claims have been verified. Of these, 1028 claims have been rejected, 2841 approved and cash compensation given in 2524 cases and 79 cases are being re-verified;
- (iii) **Allotment of plots to the DPs who have already been settled in urban areas of the State but not allotted any plot, payment of ₹ 2 lakh per family instead of plot:** As per the report received from the State Govt., out of 198 applications received by them, 48 applications were found complete. Out of these, 18 applications were placed before the verification committee, of which 6 applications have been approved, 2 have been rejected and in 10 cases re-verification is required. Remaining 30 applications will be placed before the verification committee;

(iv) Improvement of civic amenities in 46 recognized colonies: The State Government has constituted a committee to prepare a survey report for improving the civic amenities in the recognized colonies. (Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee [DPRSC], Report (183), 2014).

₹ 5.5 Lakh per family under PM development package for J&K 2015

The Government of Jammu and Kashmir vide their letter dated 20.10.2014 had sent a proposal of rehabilitation package for one time full and final settlement of the claims of 36,384 families of POJK of 1947 and Chhamb DPs of 1965 and 1971. The State Government had proposed a payment of ₹ 25 lakh to each family as a one-time compensation, amounting to a total of ₹ 9096 crore. But, in 2016 Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India sanctioned Rehabilitation to the Government of J&K for providing central assistance of ₹ 2000 crore for 36384 displaced families as one time settlement under Prime Minister's Development Package, 2015. As decided by the Government of India, the amount of central assistance of ₹ 549692/- per family will be distributed through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to the eligible beneficiaries by the Central Government directly and the State Government will transfer the State's share of ₹ 308/- per family to the beneficiaries through DBT.

The study finds that the Government has always denied relief and financial assistance to POJK DPs living outside J&K as they were neither included in the definition of permanent residents of Jammu and Kashmir nor they were considered as Displaced Persons as defined in the Jammu and Kashmir Displaced Persons (Permanent Settlement) Act (1971). Therefore, they were excluded from availing every right and benefit as provided to 'Permanent Residents' and 'Displaced Persons' of Jammu and Kashmir.

POJK displaced persons after constitutional changes in August 2019

The President of India on 5th of August, 2019, issued an order namely the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order (2019) C.O. 272 of August 5, 2019. It came into force at once and superseded the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order (1954) C.O. 48 of May 14, 1954 as amended from time to time. Subsequently, the article 35A that was inserted through Constitution Order of May 1954 was abrogated. It ended the human rights violation of the non-permanent residents of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to that, all the provisions of the Constitution of India, as amended from time to time were also applied in Jammu and Kashmir. On 6th of August another order namely the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order (2019) C.O. 273 of August 6, 2019 was issued by which all clauses of Article 370 except clause 1 were made inoperative.

It is only after the abrogation of Article 35A and amendment in Article 370, the problems of Displaced Persons of 1947 residing outside Jammu and Kashmir

has been recognised. Now, those POJK DPs residing outside J&K are legally recognised as the residents of Jammu and Kashmir. They became eligible for bonafide registration and obtaining domicile certificates in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Those registered families of POJK Displaced Persons of 1947 living outside Jammu and Kashmir are eligible for obtaining Domicile Certificates in the Union Territory of J&K under Rule 5, Clause 4 (a) of the Jammu and Kashmir Grant of Domicile Certificate (Procedure) Rules, 2020. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner (Migrants) Jammu has been given the authority to register and issue domicile certificates to Displaced Persons of POJK living outside Jammu and Kashmir. They are now treated at par with POJK Displaced Persons living within Jammu and Kashmir.

The State Administrative Council in its decision No. 192/19/2019 dated 30.07.2019 approved the submission of a proposal to the Government of India for the inclusion of those left-out displaced families of POJK 1947 who initially settled outside State of Jammu and Kashmir but later returned and settled in the State. Following the State Administrative Council's proposal, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the inclusion of 5300 families of Displaced Persons of POJK-1947 who had initially moved outside the State of Jammu and Kashmir but later on returned and settle in the State, in the Rehabilitation Package approved by the Cabinet on 30th of November, 2016. In this direction, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir on 11.12.2019 vide order No. 07-JK (DMRRR) of 2019 sanctioned the inclusion of those left out families of Displaced Persons POJK. In the same order it was stated that in respect of POJK Displaced Persons settled in different states of country, a proposal shall be submitted to the Government of India for their financial assistance under the package through the respective State Governments. The State Administrative Council Decision No.26/4/2020 dated 05.02.2020 resulted in the issuance of Government Order No. 20-JK(DMRRR) dated 10.02.2020 by the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir for one-time settlement benefit in this regard.

The High Court of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh in December 2023 in a judgement disposed of all the writ petitions. The court directed the Government of India to treat the 5300 displaced persons of POJK of 1947 through their successors/heirs settled outside the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir alike and equal with the 26319 families of POJK settled within the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir with a direction to the Government of India to treat the 5300 displaced and consequently work out one time settlement rehabilitation package for them as admissible to 26319 families of POJK. It was also directed to accord same status and entitlements in their respective favour as held and enjoyed by the 23619 families of POJK settled within the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Now, those 5300 families of displaced persons who were

excluded from the state for more than five decades got all their due rights and privileges in Jammu and Kashmir.

Issues and challenges of POJK displaced persons

The Government of Jammu and Kashmir constituted various Committees like Wadhwa Committee of 2007 and Parliamentary Standing Committee 2014 to understand the demands and issues of the people of this community but the recommendations of these committees were never implemented in reality. The main issues of POJK DP are discussed as below:

1. First victims of Jammu and Kashmir

The POJK Displaced Persons are the first victims of Pakistan aggression on Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-48. The unavoidable circumstances and vicious communal violence during this aggression forced Hindu-Sikh population from Poonch, Mirpur, Muzaffarabad and adjoining areas to safer zones. After displacement from their ancestral homes, they have been forced to live in different districts of Jammu division and outside Jammu and Kashmir. The forced displacement and subsequent rehabilitation issues have impacted them in multiple ways.

2. Status of POJK DPs

The status of POJK DPs remained ambiguous for decades together. Generally, media, various organisations and government reports termed people uprooted from POJK in 1947 as POJK Refugees. Refugees are those people who because of fear of persecution for various reasons are forced to displace outside their national boundary and take refuge in some other country. But legally, they are not refugees but displaced persons because they have been displaced within their national boundary.

3. Issue of exact data of population of POJK DPs

As per the Government records, 31,619 families of POJK DPs were registered with Provincial Rehabilitation Organisation (PRO) in 1960-62. Out of 31619, 26319 families were settled in J&K and 5300 families settled outside the State. These figures include only those families who were able to register themselves with PRO. But many families could not even register themselves due to the then prevailing situations and circumstances. Moreover with the passage of time, the number of registered as well as unregistered families has also increased manifolds. But Government of J&K and Government of India have no information regarding the exact number of families of POJK Displaced Persons. After 1960, not even a single effort was ever made by the successive governments to collect the data regarding the present number of families of POJK Displaced Persons of 1947 and their exact population. It is estimated there

are about two lakh families of displaced person with approximate population of ten to twelve lakh.

4. POJK DPs outside J&K as the victims of article 35-A

After the registration in 1960, the issues and challenges of two categories of displaced persons became different i.e., those settled inside J&K and those settled outside J&K. As per the official Government records, only 5300 registered families were living outside J&K. Though these families and their successors were the state subjects of J&K but could not become permanent residents of the state of J&K because of the provisions of article 35A of the Constitution of India. Hence, they were deprived of all the benefits of permanent residents of J&K for many decades. These 5300 families of POJK DPs were not given any sort of relief and compensation as given to those DPs settled in J&K as they were not considered as the Displaced Persons as defined in the Jammu and Kashmir Displaced Persons (Permanent Settlement) Act (1971).

5. Loss of culture and identity

POJK Displaced Persons originally belonged to Poonch, Mirpur and Muzaffarabad districts of Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir which are hilly terrains. The community is a close-knit community having its cultural and linguistic proximity with each other. Long before displacement from their original homeland they were residing as a distinct social unit having attributes of distinct community having their own value systems which they carry even after their displacement. POJK Displaced Persons is basically a Pahadi tribal community belonging to Pahadi Ethnic Group having common origin, common culture and speaking common dialect i.e. Pahadi. They have been continued to live with their ancient old cultural ethos of their forefathers. They have rich cultural heritage and literary traditions. Displacement of people from POJK and their settlement into new settings has affected their culture and identity to a greater extent. Their subsequent displacement and scattered settlement in new settings have direct impact on their social structures and institutions due to assimilation and cultural contact with host community. In their new settings, the POJK DPs were not able to practice their tradition and retain their culture with the passage of time. This cultural change due to cultural contact leads to loss of their culture and identity.

6. Loss of language

Every culture identifies itself with a language or dialect. The POJK Displaced Persons is a Pahadi community speaking Pahadi language. They have rich cultural heritage and literary traditions. But displacement has impacted their linguistic identity to great extent. Those DPs who are living in scattered locations are not able to retain their mother language and converse in Pahadi because of the larger influence of the language of host community.

7. Issue of ownership rights on evacuee land

Many POJK DPs are residing on Evacuee land and properties. They have been given occupancy rights on these properties but denied ownerships rights for longer duration. It was only in 2024 that Jammu and Kashmir Administrative Council approved the conferment of ownership (proprietary) rights to POJK DPs over evacuee land.

8. Issue of political representation

The majority of the population of POJK DPs is scattered in Jammu, Samba, Kathua, Udhampur, Reasi, Rajouri, Poonch and Ramban districts of Jammu region. Today, the estimated population of these DPs is nearly twelve lakh. But this huge population lacks political representation in Jammu and Kashmir. POJK DPs allege that without political representation POJK DPs could not raise their voices with strength. Therefore, they remained unheard and neglected most of the times by all the successive governments. Though in the year 2022, only one seat was nominated for these DPs of POJK in the State Assembly but reserving only one seat for such a huge population is nothing than a mockery with the whole community. Moreover, this nomination is still pending.

9. Issue of ST-II status for POJK displaced persons

The Government of India has granted Scheduled Tribe-II status to the Pahari community of Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir predominantly residing in Poonch, Rajouri and Kupwara districts. The POJK DPs residing in Poonch and Rajouri districts have also got the benefit of Scheduled Tribe-II status because of falling in the category of Pahari Ethnic Group, but the members of the same Pahadi community who are residing outside Poonch and Rajouri district are denied Scheduled Tribe-II status which is sheer injustice and discriminatory in nature. They also possess the same attributes of Pahadi tribe as possessed by those granted Scheduled Tribe-II status. Over the years they have been living in very harsh conditions because of their forced displacement since 1947 and suffered immensely. They have been marginalised socially, economically and politically. Now, due to denial of ST-II status they will be lagged behind in the social progression.

Discussion

In the backdrop of above-mentioned information, it can be said that the forced displacement of POJK DPs community has put it in predicament when they lost their land and property, people and relations, community and culture, and almost everything. The delayed rehabilitation and assistance and ambiguity in terms of land allotment, cash compensation etc. at the hands of government has also led to distress among the people of this community and brought a kind of inequilibrium in the community. Furthermore, 5300 families of displaced persons who were residing outside Jammu and Kashmir were the worst sufferers

at the hands of the state and became the victims of politics of exclusion. So, by using the Structural Functional analytical framework it can be said that the state itself structurally constrained this community through its various Policies, Acts and Legislations but now after the abrogation of Article 35A, amendment in Article 370 and by New Domicile Rules of 2020, an attempt has been made by the state for inclusion and to re-integrate this community.

Through the lens of Social Constructivism, it can be said that Displaced Persons of POJK living within the state or even outside the state have consolidated themselves into a unified Pahari identity through their shared culture, linguistic and cultural mobilisation, their ancestral geography, overstepping religious barriers, oral histories and collective memory. And hence, they made a shift from simply being a Displaced Persons community to a Tribe, though the quest for Scheduled Tribe-II status of those POJK DPs who resides outside the areas of Poonch and Rajouri still persists.

Conclusion

The Displaced Persons of POJK are the first victims and unheard voices of Jammu and Kashmir. They are the people who not only lost their cultural heritage but had also struggled a lot for their survival. Displacement disturbed their social cohesion and community solidarity. In fact, the entire social fabric of DPs got disturbed leading to social disarticulation. The Displaced Persons of POJK of 1947 are the living heritage of that geo-cultural region which depicts cultural resilience. They are the real stakeholders of POJK. A section of POJK DPs became the victim of article 35A and it is only post 2019 that there is a shift in their status from invisibility to recognition. But the complete rehabilitation of these displaced families cannot be done with mere financial assistance rather by honouring the historical and cultural identity of these Displaced Persons who were buried for decades but they reconstructed their identity, integrated themselves and blossomed exquisitely.

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Women under the Taliban: fiction vs. reality- a comparative study of Khaled Hosseini's *A thousand splendid suns* and the historical experiences of Afghan women

Hanna Giboy & Antony Michael

ABSTRACT

This Article Studies About the Restrictions faced by women under the Taliban rule in the novel. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini and also compares fictional representation with documented historical accounts of Afghan women experience under the Taliban governance. Through analysis of important key themes like restrictions on mobility, denial on education and health care, domestic violence and forced marriages. This study argues that Hosseini's narratives not only functions as a fiction but also as a form of historical testimony. Based on the reports from United Nations, Amnesty International, The feminist majority foundation and scholarly literary criticism. The article evaluates the accuracy, limitations, and enduring relevance on the novel depiction. Even though the novel achieves significant historical fidelity it also serves a boarder humanistic purpose by promoting global empathy for Afghan women whose stories have been hidden by political narratives.

Keywords: Taliban, Afghan women, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini, gender apartheid, fiction and history, women's rights, Afghanistan

Introduction

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is one of the most widely read literary work which explores the struggles faced by Afghan Women under the Taliban rule. The Story is set against three decades of Afghanistan history from the Soviet invasions through the civil war to the Taliban governance. The novel tells the story about two women's named Mariam and Laila, whose lives are shaped by institutionalised oppression, domestic violence and political upheaval. The novel's emotional power lies in its portrayal of how political ideologies translate into daily suffering of individual women.

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Yet literary fiction, however empathetic is not a historical document. Critics have both praised Hosseini for humanising a population often reduced to statistics and also questioned whether this narrative oversimplifies or selectively represents the complexity of the Afghan crisis. The article takes up those dynamics easily: how faithfully does *A thousand Splendid Suns* reflect the documented realities of Taliban governance in Afghanistan, where does the novel succeed in its historical accuracy and where does it fall apart

To answer these questions, this article undertakes a conceptual comparison between the novel's fictional world and historical accounts from the United Nations, Amnesty international, The Feminist Majority Foundation and Academic literary scholarship. The Analysis is divided into five key domains of women's oppression under the Taliban: freedom of movement and dress, access to education and healthcare, domestic violence, forced marriage and erasure women from public life

Historical context: the Taliban and Afghan women

To understand the novel, one must know the historical reality behind it. The Taliban seized control on Kabul on 27 September 1996 which led to a period of governance that gained world recognition because of its systematic oppression against women. From 1996 to 2001 the Taliban imposed certain restrictions based on gender with no parallel in modern governance

Based on the Feminist Majority Foundation majority of the public life was occupied by the Afghan women about 50% of students and 60% of teachers at Kabul university, 70% of school teachers, 50% of civilian workers and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women. After Taliban seized power changes in reality occurred within a week

According to Wikipedia documentation between 27 September 1996 to 17 December 2001 Taliban women were restricted from going out in public places without a male presence, they must have to wear burqa all the time, education was denied and receiving treatment from male doctors was prevented. Women who didn't follow the rules faced brutal public punishments.

These restrictions were not purely based on cultural norms but forced by the ministry for the promotion of virtue and prevention of the vice. A group of qualified mortality Police were hired to patrol streets, dispense beatings and to execute punishment for those who violated the rules. Women had to face severe problems which cost their life many of them died because they could not access healthcare and some of them were arrested because there was no male presence to escort them.

Restriction on mobility and dress: a parallel analysis

One of the major themes in *A thousand splendid Suns* is how Taliban control over women's appearance and movement. In the novel Mariam and Laila had to face different problems under the Taliban forces specifically based on their dress code and on their freedom of movement. The burqa becomes a central symbol in the novel because it is not only a garment but it represents how women hide themselves from the outside world and it also show how they control their identity and feelings through private resistance.

The character sketch from the novel can be closely connected to the documented historical accounts. The article on Wikipedia about the treatment of women under the Taliban records that they placed severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement and difficulties among people who could not afford burqa. The document further talks about testimony of a women who had been beaten for walking the streets alone without a male guardian "My father was killed in battle...I have no husband, no brother, no son. How am I to live if I can't go out alone? This resembles Mariam from the novel a woman with no male relatives and no sanctioned independence.

In December 1998, Taliban banned taxi drivers from transporting women who did not completely cover their faces ,a detail which is not present in the novel which illustrates the oppression Hosseini tries to capture .According to the UN women report (2024) even today some women must be accompanied with a male relative when they leave their homes even for a short journey Widows or women with no male relative must risk their life for buying food or accessing health care .From this we get to understand how Hosseini accurately tried to represent a structural form of oppression

The denial of education: Hosseini's Laila and historical erasure

The central motif in *A Thousand Splendid Sun* is Education. Laila was raised by an intellectual father who often said that a women's greatest asset is her education this represents a generation of Afghan women who dreamt a future of possibilities only to have it obliterated. The novel's heart-breaking phase are those in which Laila watches the schools being closed, watching her dreams narrow to the dimensions of Rasheed's household. Historically this is one of the most documented aspects of Taliban governance. The Feminist Majority Foundation notes that under Taliban rule women were not allowed to continue their education beyond the age of eight and were not allowed to work. women were forced to seek education in underground schools where they and their teachers put themselves at a risk of execution (Feminist Majority Foundations ,2020). According to medica Mondiale report (2024) one of the first political action of the Taliban was to restrict girls from attending secondary schools

Based on the UN Human Rights (2023) the women rights in Afghanistan had gone backwards during the pre 2002 era. The freedom and rights gained by women in the past 20 years were lost during the Taliban governance. This statement resembles the narrative of Laila who represents not just an individual tragedy but a collective generational loss. this removed an entire female intellectual class.

A Thousand Splendid Suns Literary Analysis (2023) notes that Hosseini's portrayal of the denial of education is not incidental but structural. The novel argues about the consequences of Taliban policies on women access to resources and futures. This analysis is supported by the literary scholarship published in the sociology& cultural review which positions Laila and Mariam as victims of gender oppression

Healthcare denied: the hospital scenes and their historical basis

Chapter 39 of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* talks about Laila's childbirth scene. She gives birth at a segregated, under resourced hospital without anaesthesia, on a cold operating table. The female doctor overseeing the delivery admits to having no X-ray equipment, no suction, no oxygen and no antibiotics. Laila is cut open on a cold table without anaesthesia it is barbaric and animalistic at the same time it was not exceptional but representative of the conditions faced by all Afghan women.

This Scene in the novel has direct historical context. The Wikipedia article on Taliban treatment of women records that the Taliban did not allow any male doctors to touch the body of a women in the name of consultation and female doctors were banned from working because of these restrictions the healthcare system collapsed and many women died because of incurable illnesses. Based on the UN women report even today Afghan women's find difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities. Many women fears keep them from leaving they're on homes and those who do may have travel miles to a clinic only to be turned away simply because they are women. Even now in some provinces women can't be treated by male doctors and there are fewer health workers. From this we get an idea of how Hosseini tries to combines his fiction with contemporary reality and trying to retain urgent relevance.

Amnesty International's Afghanistan report (2024) further notes that in November 2024 the Taliban imposed a new restriction in Herat requiring all female patients, caretakers and staff to wear burqa to access healthcare facilities the pattern Hosseini had noted in his fiction seventeen years before.

Domestic violence and forced marriages: Rasheed as a structural metaphor

The character sketch of Rasheed is an abusive husband of Mariam and Laila. Some critics mention it as a literary device which serve a dramatic villain purpose. But a deep analysis suggest that Hosseini constructed Rasheed not only as an abusive husband but he tried to portray him as a product and beneficiary of a system that supported male voice. The novel shows how The Taliban laws and customs shaped Rasheed's brutality. Forced Marriage is another aspect in the novel which is closely connected with documented realities. Mariam when she was fifteen was married to a man she never met. Laila was married because of her circumstances which involved loss of her family members. Based on the medica Mondiale report under the Taliban rule the islamists forced families to give them their unmarried daughters as brides and some families actually choose to marry off their daughter to a Talib in order to gain protection for the family.

The erasure of women from public life

The common factor in the novel and the historical document is the Taliban project to make women invisible from public space, professional life and political existence. This can be found in every phase of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* like in the boarding up of windows so women cannot be seen from the streets, in the closing of schools and workplaces and even in the reduction of women's entire existence to the domestic sphere under a husband's authority

The Feminist Majority Foundation describes the Taliban power as a system in which women of Afghanistan are under home arrest because they didn't have freedom of work, visibility, education, voice healthcare and mobility. The UN Human Rights reports that even today Afghan women feels invisible, isolated, suffocated living in prison like conditions. In every phase of the novel, we can see invisibility and imprisonment. Notes scholarly analysis observes that Hosseini focused the narrative on women because of the complexities faced by Afghan women. The Amnesty International Afghanistan reports that the Taliban governance further restricted freedom of expression and the right to education by banning university book written by women a detail connected to Hosseini's Novel.

Where the novel falls short: critical limitations

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has remarkable Historical fidelity because it tries to record women experience in Afghan. The world socialist web sites argues that the novel only hints indirectly that even after the Taliban fell the women condition was still worse. Even the Karzi governance failed in the improvement but the novel dose not strongly criticize it. The novel ended in 2003 before the power was regained so the readers may interpret that the issues were solved.

This is a substantive criticism. By closing the novel in a moment of tentative hope, Hosseini risk implying that fall of Taliban was a sufficient resolution a narration which involved a continuation of both Patriarchal violence and the Taliban's return to power in 2021. This optimism can be seen in Laila's ability to travel alone at the end of the novel symbolises a temporary restoration of women's freedom and mobility. Further the novel focuses on urban and rural Afghan women in Kabul for whom Taliban restrictions were an additional layer of tribal customs, geographic isolation and economic vulnerability. The Medica Mondiale notes that many young girls are at risk of forced marriages as the famine raging in Afghanistan drives people to desperation a dimension that the novel touches but not fully foreground.

Feminist literary theory and the novel

Feminist Literary Theory offers a multidimensional framework through which Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Can be examined. It is not just a work of fiction but a cultural text that documents, interrogates and challenges the patriarchal system that governs the Afghan Women's life across generations. The Feminist Critical Theory in the novel moves beyond the theme and exposes the ideologies of gender oppression, the politics of representation and the interplay between narrative voice and lived female experience. Research bridges fiction and historical reality which evaluates how literature reflects and reshapes our understanding of women under the Taliban.

The foundational level of feminist literary criticism by scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar says that literature is never politically neutral instead text are embedded within patriarchal ideologies systems which determine what all stories must be told, whose sufferings should be visible and how female voices are being suppressed .We can connect Showalter's concept of gyno criticism, the study of women as writers and subjects within a literary tradition with Hosseini, a male author writing female protagonists in a deeply patriarchal cultural context. He gives voices to women whose stories have been historically been invisible, the way of narrating those stories through male author raises critical questions and views about authenticity, agency and representation.

Fiction and contemporary reality: the weight of representation

When Taliban regained power in Afghanistan by August 2021, they once again erased women from public life. They banned girls from secondary and higher education, prohibited women from working in most sectors and enforced mandatory male guardianship. Based on the report from 2023 by United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Afghanistan remains the only country in the world to ban women and girls from education beyond primary level. Feminist readings of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* extends beyond literary

into the geopolitical and humanitarian. Thus, the novel functions as an act of witness, mourning and an object of critical scrutiny for female scholars.

Maraim and Lalia: De Beauvoir, Butler and the gendered subject

The two protagonists in the novel, Mariam and Lalia are represented in a way that is closely correspondent to key feminist theoretical frameworks. Simone de Beauvoir theorized as the condition of women as the other can be connected to the character Mariam an illegitimate, child abandoned by her father Jalil, her forced marriage to Rasheed and her execution by the Taliban are not presented aberrations but a logical extension of social order in which women does not have any legal, moral and spiritual standing. De Beauvoir's argument that patriarchy denies women the status of transcendent subjects reducing them instead of immanence to the domestic and the bodily resonates with painful precision in Mariam's arc.

Lalia in the other hand represents a more complex negotiation between feminist aspiration and structural constraint. She enters the narrative with what feminist theorist Adrienne Rich might call a "will to change" a desire to inhabit her own life on her own terms. Educated, intellectually alive and politically conscious. Yet the Taliban's takeover, Rasheed's violence and her family members death made her nascent autonomy possible. Judith Butler theory about performativity of gender aligns with Hosseini's portrayal of Lalia. Lalia's identity is not fixed but certain scenarios shaped and reshaped by the social norms enforced around her. Even the burqa, the silence, the erasure of self become compulsory acts, not chosen one becomes pre-scripted performance under the Taliban.

Fiction against historical record: corroboration and its limits

The comparative feminist reading of the novel against the historical documents and realities involves both the strength and the limits of literary representation. Hosseini's representation of Taliban governance restrictions, the prohibition of women leaving home without male presence, closing of schools and bathhouses to women, the public violations on dress codes are related to the documented findings of human rights organisation including Amnesty International. The Revolutionary Association of women of Afghan (RAWA) which documented Taliban abuses throughout the 1990s recorded testimonies that is present in the novel as well: women were beaten for showing up in public without male presence, denied medical care because male doctors could not treat them and female doctors were banned from working and practising and were imprisoned in their home because of gender inequality.

However, the feminist literary theory questions the uncritical approach of fictional narrative with documentary testimony. Whatever its political intentions be it must require a plot structure, emotional arc, character resolution and inevitably a degree of aesthetics shaping that historical reality does not possess.

The ending scene of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows Lalia return to Kabul to rebuild the orphanage where her daughter Aziza stayed because of poverty, in memory of Mariam offers a resolution that many feminist scholars might identify as what Lauren Berlant terms “cruel optimism” a narrative closure which include all the aspects which satisfy the emotional, risky factors of structural oppression. The real Afghan women testimonies RAWA collected did not involve these details Many remained displaced, Widowed and traumatized in refugee campus in Pakistan and Iran throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s

Postcolonial feminist critique: who speaks, and for whom?

The question who speaks, and for whom is the central aspect of postcolonial feminist criticism associated with scholars like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Spivak's one of the most famous essays “Can the Subaltern Speak?” raises the problem women in patriarchal system and how their voices are being suppressed. Mohanty's critique of western feminism talks about Third World Woman directly relevant to international readers of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The risk, as Mohanty argues is that such narratives even though compassionately written can inadvertently reproduce colonial gaze. Therefore, Afghan women become the objects of pity and rescue rather than the agents of their own political and social information.

The critique does not diminish the novel's humanitarian impact. In the west *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was able to generate public awareness of Afghan women's suffering and generated significant charitable interest in Afghan education and women's rights organization. But feminist theory insist that awareness and representation are not equivalent to justice and the way in which story are portrayed is as much as important as the real story. Afghan feminist writers and activists and the diasporic writers of the time focuses on the importance of centring Afghan women's own intellectual and political traditions. The poetry of Meena Keshwar Kamal, the activist of RAWA, the legislative achievements of women parliamentarians during 2004-2021 constitutional period rather than locating Afghan female experience exclusively within the frame work of victimhood and survival.

Gender apartheid and the novel's renewed urgency in the present

In the current scenario where the Taliban post 2021 governance has been described by UN experts as constituting “gender apartheid” the feminist reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* takes on yet another layer of significance. The novel published in 2007, was written in a period cautious about Afghan women's' futures. Girls went to school again, women started working and there were many government and international funding female literary programs across the country. The historical moment can be now seen in Afghanistan.

Reading the novel and connecting with the events occurred in 2021 and after and looking it through a feminist lens portray it not just as a literary analysis but also as a act of grief. A recognition that the life of Laila's generation of woman briefly possessed have been extinguished and the conditions Mariam faced have been restored.

A Thousand Splendid Suns performs dual role in comparative study in the view of feminist theory. Even though the novel was able to bring out women whose lives have been systematically devalued and suppressed it also provides the critical tools necessary to interrogate the novel's representational politics not only what Hosseini shows us but the act is showing necessarily shapes, selects and omits. Literature is not something that substitute history and representation is not something which substitute for rights but when it is read with a feminist critical theory view, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* emerges as a text that both demands and rewards precisely this kind of sustained, politically engaged attention one that honours the complexities of Afghan women's experience rather than turning it to a single, tragic narrative of surging and survival

The ethics of empathy: literature, responsibility and the limits of fictional witness

The First thing that comes in the mind of the reader of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the suffering of real, historical documented subject is one of the ethical responsibilities. The Feminist Literary Theory equips readers with the tools to analyse gender, power and representation with critical precision it also raises certain obligation. The obligation to ask what fiction owes to women whose lives it evokes and what the readers owe to those same women once the book is closed.

Martha Nussbaum's influential argument that literature cultivates moral empathy that the act of occupying another's perspective through narration develops capacity of imagination. Based on this *A Thousand Splendid Suns* function by making the suffering of Afghan Women emotionally connected to readers who might otherwise reach out the suffering only as statistics, political or historical document. The novel's power lies particularly in Mariam's humiliation, Laila's grief and Rasheed's casual brutality these are not just data but experiences of different Afghan women's that demands moral response. In this sense, Hosseini's fiction does what journalism and policy documents rarely can it refuses the reader the comfort of detachment.

Yet this empathetic approach has its own ethical risk many feminist and postcolonial scholars have consistently warned about the empathy shown towards racialised other can slide in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the violence of identification" a process by which the privileged reader's emotional experience of another's suffering becomes paradoxically a way of focusing self rather than sufferer .When the western readers weep for Mariam and Laila, the question

must be asked whether the emotional engagement was able to make any structural change in the lives of Afghan women?. Even the current scenarios which occurred in 2024 over four million girls remain out school and women are prohibited from appearing in public spaces without a male presence suggest empathy, however genuine, has not been sufficient to reverse the conditions the novel depicts.

The ethics of fictional witness requires more than compassionate reading. It requires that literature must be understood at the very beginning rather than at the end it helps in deeper engagement with historical, political and humanitarian realities that fiction never fully contain. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a work which involve both moral seriousness and feminist dimensions but the Afghan women it represents continue to exist beyond its pages, in conditions that demand not only literary attention but also political will. Therefore, Feminist Literary Theory, measures literature of witness is not the tears it draws but the action it inspires.

Discussion: fiction as historical testimony

The comparative analysis presented in this article suggests that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents a variety of ways in a large measure, as a historical testimony in fictional form. Even though its domains of mobility, education, healthcare, domestic violence and public erasure it closely connected to historical accounts. This is not accidental, Hosseini an Afghan- American writer with deep connection towards his country brought both research and cultural memory to his work.

The Wikipedia article on the novel notes that Hosseini succeeded in making the emotional reality of Mariam and Laila's lives tangible and also giving readers an idea about what daily life in Kabul looks like both before and during the Taliban governance. The novel's strength not only lies in historical document but how Hosseini tried to translate them into the language of personhood: Life of women who cannot go the hospital, a wife whose dreams are hidden under a burqa. This Personalisation of Political violence is the novel's most radical act and a gift to readers to understand the Afghan women crisis

Based on The PMC Published study on Hosseini's women as modern architypes notes that novel presents Afghan women not as victims but as obedient, resistant and empowered in different measures. Many report notes Afghan women as pity but Hosseini gives them individuality, dignity through his novel

Conclusion

A Thousand Splendid Suns is not a perfect historical document but it portrays women during the Taliban era across dress, movement, education, healthcare and domestic life. Hosseini marks the historical realities not only as a novel of

literature but as a form of suffering witness. It limits the optimistic ending, the urban focus, the silence on post 2003 development which are real but they don't thrash out the achievement. The UN Women Report says the Taliban has taken over their right of education, healthcare, mobility, freedom of movement. Even today women face restrictions and not has been reversed. The issues Hosseini noted in fiction continues in reality. From this we can understand that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is not just a historical document but a witness to the struggles faced by Afghan women and world's obligation to witness their struggle is far from over.

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From strategic autonomy to minilateralism: reassessing India's Indo-Pacific strategy in a changing geopolitical order

Rajat Kumar & Bhawna Sharma

ABSTRACT

The Indo Pacific has become the major theatre of current geopolitical rivalry, driven by China's growing influence, maritime rivalry and the increasing strategic alignment of regional powers. In this evolving landscape, India must strengthen its security ties with its partners like the United States, Japan and Australia, while also maintaining the strategic partnership with Russia and preserving strategic autonomy as its core foreign policy principle. This paper identifies that India's Indo-Pacific policy is not a shift towards formal alliance politics, but a readjustment of autonomy through flexible and issue-based cooperation. India also seeks to deepen security cooperation in the framework of minilaterals like the Quad through avoiding binding alliance commitments. The study demonstrates that New Delhi has adopted a strategy of selective alignment that enable it to balance security imperatives with independent decision making. The paper conceptualises that by moving beyond the traditional autonomy or the alignment; India's approach is a form of flexible alignment that reflects behaviours of middle powers within an increasingly multipolar and fragmented international order.

Key Words: *Indo-Pacific; Strategic autonomy; Quad; Flexible alignment; Minilateralism; Middle powers; International order.*

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become the main battleground of global geopolitical competition. It is a large maritime region in which the traditional great power system of the 20th century is being challenged by the emerging power structure of the 21st century (Cannon & Rossiter, 2018). The region is not simply geographic construct, but it is also a region of intense economic interdependence and growing security dilemmas, primarily due to the increasing competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The great power rivalry has reshaped the Indo-Pacific region from a facilitator of global trade to a

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region of contested space where territorial disputes, military buildup and anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities have become a reality (Fong, 2024, ; Randev, 2022; Singh, 2013). Unlike the rigid bipolarity of the cold war, the contemporary Indo-Pacific is characterised by overlapping interests and a more complex strategic environment in which middle powers must navigate the pressures of great power competition. In this changing context, the emergence of China and its more assertive maritime approach alongside growing concerns over norms such as freedom of navigation, has forced regional countries to change their security strategies (Doyle & Rumley, 2019).

Within this evolving theatre of great power rivalry, India has become a key leading power with proactive Indo-Pacific vision. Indian engagement is no longer confined to the immediate subcontinental periphery, but has expanded through a strong maritime strategy which emphasizes a free, open and inclusive regional order (Kim, 2024,). This change can be seen in policy documents like the Act East Policy and the recently expanded Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) into Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MHASAGAR) which reflects India's strategic outreach from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific Ocean (Yadav, 2025). Rather than conventional reactive stance, the shift in New Delhi's policy is more proactive and is meant to influence the security architecture of the region. This is reflected through its developing strategic maritime infrastructure such as the Sabang port in Indonesia, the Agelega island facilities in Mauritius as well as in the institutionalization of White Shipping Information Agreements with regional partners. These are part of a reorientation in India's strategic consciousness to expand maritime domain awareness (MDA), connectivity and regional influence, that recognises the country's developmental trajectory as intertwined with the stability of Indo-Pacific maritime corridors (Mishra, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2024).

However, India's increasing engagement in Indo-Pacific region has brought a dilemma in its foreign policy to the forefront, namely the contradiction between its foundational principle of strategic autonomy and the growing need of security cooperation with new allies. Historically, strategic autonomy allowed India to maintain independent decision making and not to entangled in formal security pacts like NATO and WARSAW (Akbar, 2026; Donald, 2024). Yet, the rise of China as an asymmetric threat has forced New Delhi to seek greater security cooperation with the U.S. and its partners, most notably through minilateral frameworks such as Quad (Peters, 2025).

This changing stance raises the question as to how is India deepening security ties without giving up strategic autonomy? Realist approaches particularly Balance of Threat theory would predict a shift toward formal alliance formation in response to rising threats (Stephen Walt, 1987). From an offensive realist perspective, John Mearsheimer (2001) similarly contends that states, operating

under anarchy, are driven to enhance their security through strategic alignments (Mearsheimer, 2001). While autonomy centric perspectives would expect continued distance from such arrangements. India's behaviour, however, reflects neither outcome, but instead suggests a more complex strategic logic. This paper argues that India is not undergoing a linear shift towards formal alignment, but is instead; reconfiguring strategic autonomy to operate within an increasingly minilateral security architecture. In doing so, it secures alignment like benefits without incurring the institutional costs of formal alliances.

Defining the concept of strategic autonomy and minilateralism

Strategic autonomy refers to a policy aimed at maintaining independence in key strategic areas, enabling a state to make its own decisions despite growing global interdependence. In International Relations scholarship, constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt has conceptualised autonomy as the capacity of a state-society complex to exercise control over the allocation of its resources and the direction of its political choices, not merely to ensure survival but also to preserve its liberty (Wendt, 1999). Within the Realist tradition, however, a conceptual distinction is drawn between autonomy and sovereignty. As David Held argues, sovereignty denotes the ultimate authority and power to make final decisions regarding a state's future, whereas autonomy refers more specifically to the capacity of nation-states to effectively implement goals and policies once they have been established (Sterling-Folker, 2002).

In the Indian context, however, the notion of strategic autonomy goes beyond this narrow distinction by combining both autonomy and sovereignty. It signifies not only independence in decision-making but also the ability to execute policies without external limitations (Krasner, 1999, p. 3). This broader understanding is crucial for analysing India's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. Strategic autonomy has evolved from the earlier doctrine of non-alignment. While non-alignment emerged during the cold war as a defensive strategy to avoid entanglement in bipolar rivalries, strategic autonomy is a proactive and pragmatic doctrine suited to a multipolar world order. It emphasises flexibility and the preservation of independent choice, allowing India to engage with multiple partners based on national interest rather than ideological commitments (Monsonis, 2010); Muraviev et al., 2022).

In practice, this concept is represented by multi-alignment, wherein India's partnership formation is not based on the criteria of formal alliances. This approach reflects a deep-seated concern about the risks of entrapment in rigid security arrangements, where a state's interests may become subordinate to those of a dominant partner. This means that India is not involved in treaty alliances and at the same time is strengthening ties in the field of defence, technology, maritime safety etc. Strategic autonomy is not isolation, it is the skillful handling of interdependence (Vu et al., 2024).

Minilateralism therefore becomes an important mechanism in the current context that strives to balance autonomy and cooperation. Minilateralism refers to small, issue-focused coalitions of like-minded states that prioritise flexible, selective coordination and faster problem solving over broad membership, legalisation, and heavy bureaucratic structures often associated with multilateral institutions (Thakur, 2024; Thakur, 2025). This is well captured in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which provides India with the opportunity to pursue security cooperation while preserving strategic autonomy. Minilateralism can enable a form of so-called flexible alignment in which India engages in a variety of overlapping partnerships while not being bound to any single bloc (Saha, 2025). This allows New Delhi to continue strengthening partnership with countries in the Indo-Pacific region such as the USA and Japan and continue its engagements with other platforms like BRICS and SCO. This way, rigid bloc politics is avoided and India's diplomatic manoeuvrability is bolstered. India's approach is a departure from the idea of autonomy as a lack of alignment to one of multiple alignments that need to be managed effectively. India is building a network of partnerships through minilateral frameworks to strengthen its agency and shape regional order instead of simply playing a passive role in it (Mishra, 2023).

India's Indo-Pacific vision

The idea of Indo-Pacific is portrayed as a new strategic construct but intellectual roots of Indian strategic thought go back to pre-Independence era. Indian leaders and thinkers were early to understand the geopolitical and maritime importance of the region. The change in the balance of power towards Asia was predicted by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* (1945) when he said that "the Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic... and India will inevitably exercise an important influence there" (Nehru, 2008). Likewise, K. M. Panikkar pointed out the importance of maritime power, stating that "it is the geographical position of India that makes the Indian Ocean the Indian Ocean" and that "in the future, a purely land policy of defence will be blind" (Panikkar, 1945). These preliminary insights reflect India's longstanding understanding of its presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This ideational interaction was also manifested in Nehru's attempts to build Afro-Asian solidarity through such events as the Asian Relations Conference (1947) and the Bandung Conference (1955) in which India was instrumental in forming a cooperative regional order. But in the cold war era, this pro-active outlook got restricted by security concerns with Pakistan and China and an inward-looking economic policy, which restricted India's quest for greater regional integration (Pandalai, 2022).

The conceptual evolution of Indo-Pacific in Indian policy thinking was slow and had to be accepted in the policy sphere as a whole after being introduced in the naval and strategic circles. The earliest mentions can be found in India's Naval Doctrine 2004, which acknowledged that the global maritime focus had shifted

to the Indian and Pacific Oceans and then further in the work of naval thinkers like Premvir Das and Gurpreet Khurana, who associated the idea with maritime cooperation and strategic competition (Das, 2006; Khurana, 2007). The concept became more prominent following Shinzo Abe's 2007 address, "Confluence of the Two Seas," which helped to shape the Indo-Pacific as a unified strategic region (Abe, 2007). The term had made its way into the official discourse after 2010 in India and was being emphasised by the policy makers in the context of India's economic development, regional security and relations with ASEAN. In 2015, India's Maritime Security Strategy recognised the Indo-Pacific as the key region of geopolitical and economic change and urged a shift in the strategic paradigm. The idea was further solidified under Narendra Modi with policies like the Act East Policy and the strengthening of the maritime engagement, recognizing the Indo Pacific as a key strategic and economic interest for India (Scott, 2012).

This evolution was not only a gradual expansion of terminology and policy, but also reflected deeper structural shifts in the regional and global order. The use of the Indo-Pacific concept in New Delhi's strategic vocabulary is a strategic maneuver that is a reflection of the changing dynamics of the international security landscape and the shortcomings of the post-cold war security order. India's shift from a predominantly continental to a more integrated maritime-continental strategy has been influenced by the rise and assertiveness of China and the question of America's future in the region. The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic theatre offered a platform to tackle these concerns, acknowledging that India's economic and security interests are increasingly intertwined with the stability of maritime routes from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific (Baruah, 2020).

This change can be best understood as the transition from 'Look East Policy' of the 1990s to the more strategic 'Act East Policy' and finally to a more comprehensive Indo-Pacific vision. The Look East Policy was more about economic cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries, whereas the Act East Policy was a shift towards more comprehensive strategic and security cooperation with the countries (Pandalai, 2022). India's modern Indo-Pacific strategy, however, is more expansive and ambitious, accompanied by not only participating in the region, but also influencing its dynamics. This change is not only an affirmation of continuity in India's policy of regional stability and multipolarity but also an acknowledgment that the goals of regional stability and multipolarity now demand that economic and security interests be brought closer together to address new challenges, such as China's growing maritime footprint (Gagan & Kumar, 2025).

India's articulation of its Indo-Pacific vision, particularly in the SAGAR and the 'Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative' (IPOI), offers a nuanced model for this new strategic posture. SAGAR, especially, acts as a doctrinal anchor which places

the maritime domain as a major pillar of national security. India's focus on inclusivity, a rules-based order and freedom of navigation make it a normative power, which differs from more exclusionary or hegemonic regional orders. Most importantly, the inclusivity that New Delhi has insisted upon is a linguistic and strategic protection, which enables India to deal with the West, while also making it clear that India's strategy is not to form a closed bloc of allies. This rhetorical balancing act is crucial for a state that wants to reap the rewards of security cooperation while avoiding the strategic price of formal alignment. It illustrates the manner in which India's policy processes help to reconcile the small with the big in the region (Luthra, 2024).

In 2025, this continued with the transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, which was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Mauritius. MAHASAGAR expands the geographical and policy horizon of SAGAR by introducing the concept of inter-connected oceanic regions, thereby highlighting the role of India in the Indian Ocean (Durai, 2025). It highlights security cooperation in addition to trade, capacity building, technology along with finance partnerships to promote sustainable growth. This expansion is a part of India's push to shift its focus from the Indian Ocean to the broader Indo-Pacific region and to incorporate security, connectivity and development diplomacy. The early efforts, like the deployment at sea and outreach to partners from Africa and island state of Indian Ocean region, indicate that MAHASAGAR is not just a vision but an operational plan as well (Vishwakarma, 2025; Pandey, 2025).

In reality, India's strategic actions in the Indo-Pacific region reflect a significant shift towards a 'maritime turn' and the development of an intricate network of overlapping partnerships. Instead of depending on single security provider, New Delhi has adopted a "strategic hedging" approach, which involves developing more advanced maritime domain awareness (MDA) projects, conducting joint naval exercises and logistics exchange agreements with multiple partners. This approach to collaboration demonstrates a desire to cooperate in a more functional, rather than systemic, manner, responding to specific problems like piracy, disaster relief and maritime security. India is not just diversifying its regional outreach to include middle powers such as Japan, Australia and France, but also making sure that they are not a secondary partner in a US-led coalition. This strategy would enable India to be a 'net security provider' in its neighbourhood and further expand its influence in the Western Pacific, thus keeping a balance between regional engagement and strategic independence (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024).

The Indo-Pacific pivot is not a radical shift from India's past but a sophisticated adaptation of its traditional strategic culture to the new systemic realities (Gagan & Kumar, 2025). The idea of strategic autonomy is still in place, but the way to get there has changed. In a more competitive setting, autonomy will no longer

be achieved by distance or by remaining neutral. Instead, it will be achieved by active involvement and by the capacity to build up several partnerships to avoid regional hegemony. New Delhi is not giving up its fundamental tenets, but simply adapting them to a world in which threats are more asymmetric and power more fluid. This adaptation serves India's interests in the face of China's rise to a systemic power and yet retains its sovereign decision-making capacity, which has always been a cornerstone of its grand strategy. This shift from a continental power to a maritime power will pave the way for India's greater engagement in minilateralism. As India looks to expand its strategic outlook and further strengthen its security cooperation, the question is how to balance the growing institutionalisation of such mechanisms as the Quad with the rigidities of a formal alliance?

From non-alignment to strategic minilateralism

India's foreign policy is about balancing its growing security architectures with its persistent refusal to enter a formal alliance system. India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific is not a timid move towards the West or a diluted version of non-alignment, but a nuanced and deliberate approach of 'selective alignment' that is part of a long-standing strategic autonomy (Hasan, 2026). In the post-cold war era of great power competition, New Delhi has realised that the old concept of autonomy or non-alignment and alignment is no longer a viable strategic tool to become an effective regional actor. Rather, India has implemented a hybrid approach that hinges on robust and meaningful security ties with its allies and like-minded counterparts such as the United States, Japan and Australia as the main platform for safeguarding its autonomy, which it is sometimes accused of abandoning. The use of minilateralism to fill the capability-threat gap results in India getting aligned like outcomes without the sovereignty and autonomy constraining costs of a formal treaty (Vishwanath, 2025; Lanka, 2025).

The rationale behind India's minilateral approach is pragmatic, aiming to ensure strategic agility and reduce institutional entrapment. In Realist theory, traditional alliances require a high level of policy convergence and may lead to the marginalization of a middle power's interests in favor of the hegemons. Such an arrangement is politically impossible in a post-colonial country such as India where the strategic culture is one of independent decision making. One alternative institutional structure is the minilateral, such as the Quad. These are clusters of issues, not treaty-based and are of a functional nature, enabling India to pool resources and intelligence in high-stakes areas such as maritime security without having to sign a 'collective defense' clause. The Quad is not an 'Asian NATO' but a flexible platform for 'strategic hedging' that enables New Delhi to demonstrate a collective will to Beijing, while maintaining 'exit options' for its own distinct interests in the global south and with other Eurasian powers (Mitra, 2023; Rajagopalan, 2021).

In the realm of Maritime security, this policy is reflected in a policy of deterrence by partnership instead of deterrence by alliance. Indian naval exercises have seen a significant increase in the number and complexity in the Indo Pacific, including Malabar and Milan naval exercises, and the formation of numerous logistics exchange agreements (Das, 2025). The clashes are effective strategic messages of India's commitment to a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). But a closer look at these partnerships shows that they are carefully orchestrated to prevent a formal military engagement. Instead of joining in a bloc-based naval exercise, India is focused on 'Maritime Domain Awareness' (MDA) and capacity building, which would further strengthen India's 'net security provider' role, through 'external balancing' against the asymmetric naval challenge from China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ((Mishra, 2024; Boquerat, 2018).

India's engagement is based on 'issue-based alignment' without an ideological or systemic commitment. Today, vulnerabilities in supply chains, critical technologies and environmental resilience are a key aspect of security in geopolitics. India's inclusion in the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) and the Quad's critical and emerging technology working groups reflects its efforts to harmonize its technical and economic requirements with the West to reduce reliance on China (Wadhwa, 2024). Same is the scenario in the recently fa Pax Silica in December 2025 to secure and diversify supply chain for semiconductor, artificial intelligence and critical minerals. It is not a move toward the West's economic bloc, but a strategic attempt to create domestic resilience and to cooperate effectively. India's linkage with specific sectors, including semiconductor security, 5G diversification, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), provides it with access to high-end Western technology and capital, which are vital to its own balancing act. This enables New Delhi to modernise its state capacity without losing its multi-aligned approach, which helps it maintain its diplomatic relations with non-Western groupings such as BRICS and the SCO (Amoss, 2025).

The balancing act of this strategic distance needs to be constantly adjusted and rebalanced (Kaura, 2018). While several scholars argued that India's increasing closeness to the United States will come at the cost of its strategic autonomy, which is not the case. Some analysts like S. Kalyanaraman have warned that greater interaction with Washington could lead to pressure on India on its core issues such as nuclear policy and Kashmir, while former National Security Advisor M. K. Narayanan (2018) has questioned institutional arrangements such as the 2+2 dialogue as a deviation from India's traditional strategic culture. India's defence cooperation with the United States undermines India's material independence by making it more dependent on the military and technological systems of the United States (Narayanan, 2018; Smith, 2020).

But such views are static and too limiting for what autonomy means. Today, however, Indian strategic thinking is more inclined to consider partnership with the United States as a force multiplier for autonomy rather than a limitation. India's relationship with Washington is functional and utilitarian, not in the traditional sense of a partnership, but rather to enhance its ability to function on its own in a more competitive regional environment. New Delhi is able to do this through sharing of technology, intelligence and maritime cooperation with the United States, which helps in balancing China's assertiveness without necessarily giving up on its strategic options (Devi & Singh, 2024).

This shift is rooted in broader structural changes. The steady deterioration of Sino-Indian relations marked by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash and ongoing border standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has significantly reduced the strategic space for equidistance. The growing cooperation between China and Pakistan, China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region and China's assertive territorial claims have deepened the perception in New Delhi that China is the biggest threat to India's sovereignty than Washington is. (Gokhale, 2021; Mardell, 2020). Hence, the tendency to align with the United States is viewed as a practical solution to the pressures of the system and not as a rejection of the non-alignment policy.

Meanwhile, India's policy is clearly non-alienated. It has continued to maintain 'special and privileged' partnership with Russia for its defence indigenisation requirements, this has been reflecting in India's membership in the groupings like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and has kept its independent stance on important global issues. This is in keeping with the broader policy of 'multi-alignment,' which involves India playing multiple power centres at the same time to not be dependent on any one partner. Cooperation with the United States is not a commitment, but one element of a diversified strategic portfolio (Mishra, 2023). India's changing stance is a basic re-thinking of the concept of strategic autonomy. In an age of growing great power competition, autonomy cannot be best maintained through isolation but by selective and strategic alliances that build a state's power to withstand coercion, as scholars such as Rajesh Rajagopalan (2017) have argued. In this regard, India's interaction with the U.S. is not about alignment but about creating a multipolar regional order where no single power, neither China nor the U.S., can dominate the strategic sphere in Asia (Rajagopalan, 2017).

India has pioneered a new approach in international relations by advancing a model of security integration that prioritises functional outcomes over institutional rigidity. Minilateralism is the key structural enabler of this hybridity, allowing India to 'align' its interests with the Quad partners without 'aligning' its destiny with them. It is a strategy that recognises that threats are too complex for any one state to deal with alone in the twenty first century, but the cost of traditional alliances too high for a state with India's history and

ambitions. India has developed a distinctive approach to 'flexible alignment' which involves strategic autonomy and high-end cooperation in a few areas, but not at the cost of compromising its sovereignty (Joseph, 2025, p. 313). This will have some deep implications for the future of the security architecture in the region. The question now is not whether India is aligning, but how India is redefining the nature of alignment itself. The future in the Indo-Pacific will not be a new cold war between two monolithic blocs: U.S. and China, but a complex mix of overlapping security clusters where middle powers such as India can make a difference in maintaining a precarious balance of power (Joseph, 2025).

Reconceptualizing alignment in the Indo-Pacific

India's strategic course in the Indo-Pacific is not a simple transition from the post-colonial policy of non-alignment to a formal western alliance system. Instead, India's changing posture is part of a larger strategic adaptation, in which the concept of strategic autonomy is being redefined to continue to be relevant in a more complex and multipolar international landscape. India's increased involvement in minilateral arrangements like the Quad is an example of selective or functional alignment that is operationally meaningful but institutionally flexible. India has tried to balance its material security needs, especially the threat from China's rise, with its tradition of independent decision making by separating security cooperation from the requirements of a formal alliance (Muraviev et al., 2022). Strategic autonomy has thus shifted from a policy of diplomatic isolation to the active and multi-faceted interaction with several partners, as a way to maintain national agency and avoid regional domination (Abraham & Purushothaman, 2024).

States are generally believed to either maintain independence by staying far away or to forfeit autonomy for security assurances. But as the Indian case shows, the binary model is becoming an increasingly poor way of grasping the strategic actions of today's middle powers. States can pursue deep security cooperation, intelligence sharing and military interoperability without committing to the political limitations of a formal alliance arrangement. In this respect, alignment has become more and more issue-based, flexible, and modular, instead of fixed or ideological. Strategic autonomy is thus a more appropriate lens for understanding the actions of states that are also trying to maneuver in the face of growing great power competition, but do not necessarily want to join one bloc or the other, like Vietnam, Indonesia or France (Hoo & Teo, 2022).

The rise of minilateralism is a sign that regional stability might not rely on the same kind of blocs as during the cold war. Rather, the Indo-Pacific seems to be heading towards a more decentralised and networked order, with overlapping security partnerships and issue-specific coalitions. India's strategy is in line with this shift. Minilateral platforms offer states greater strategic flexibility and do

not suffer from the political rigidity of traditional alliances, through maritime security, supply chain resilience, critical technologies and humanitarian cooperation. In a world where a lot of regional actors consider the full containment of China to be economically impractical and politically undesirable, such arrangements are especially appealing. This means that India's approach helps to create a more resilient and flexible regional order that aims to balance without perpetuating the zero-sum bipolar confrontation (Rajagopalan, 2021).

The Indian experience is a part of the larger shift in middle-power strategy in the age of renewed great power rivalry. In a world of growing competition between the United States and China, middle powers are trying to steer clear of the strategic inflexibility of choosing between the two, while at the same time developing the partnerships they need to safeguard their security and economic interests (Zhiyenbayev, 2025). India's approach demonstrates that influence in a multipolar world does not require dependence on a single power. Instead, it depends on maintaining strategic relevance with multiple major powers. It is a step towards a more pragmatic and functional diplomacy, where alliances are built based on strategic needs, not ideology. The shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment thus marks not the loss of autonomy but its transformation in the face of a new international landscape (George, 2025).

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific strategy is in essence a unique blend of ideas and practices of modern statecraft in the context of a more competitive and interdependent international system. India has not given up its strategic autonomy, but has redefined it in a way that suits the requirements of the twenty first century geopolitics. New Delhi has tried to merge strategic advantages of alignment with political flexibility of autonomy through selective partnerships, minilateral engagement and issue-based cooperation. It is not a retreat from independent foreign policy, but a move to maintain national interest in a changing power dynamic, as we witness in the Quad. In the modern era, strategic autonomy is not just about political distance or non-engagement. Rather, autonomy is now more dependent on a state's capacity to involve several power centres without being structurally tied to any one of them. This is the rationale behind India's flexible alignment. India has been trying to diversify its relations with the West and at the same time maintain its ties with other countries like Russia and join institutions like BRICS and the SCO to maximise its strategic options in a multipolar world.

The Indian way of doing things is significant for the future of Indo-Pacific order. In an era of economic interdependence and increasing great power competition, flexible and issue-based partnerships could be the preferred method of regional security management. Middle powers will be far more important in determining this new order than what the alliance theory suggests regarding balance of power

and managing threats. The long-term effectiveness of India's hybrid approach will thus impact not just on India's own trajectory of becoming a leading power but also on the overall trajectory of regional stability and multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific.

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Constitutional promise to democratic reality: historical and constitutional analysis of the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam*

Shikha Saini

ABSTRACT

The *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam*, 2023 represents a landmark development in India's constitutional commitment to gender equality and political empowerment. This paper examines the historical evolution, constitutional foundations, and contemporary debates surrounding women's reservation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, with particular emphasis on the 2026 implementation debate. It traces the movement from the *Towards Equality* Report (1974), the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and repeated but unsuccessful Women's Reservation Bills (1996-2010) to the enactment of the 2023 constitutional amendment. The paper argues that the constitutional discourse has shifted from the normative justification for reservation to questions concerning its implementation through the Census and delimitation process. By analysing parliamentary debates, constitutional provisions, international commitments, and comparative experiences of gender quotas, the study demonstrates that the effective implementation of women's reservation is essential for achieving substantive political equality and strengthening representative democracy.

Keywords: *Women's Reservation; Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam; Political Empowerment; Gender Equality; Constitutional Amendment.*

Introduction

The debate surrounding the Women's Reservation Bill, enacted as the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam* through the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, remains one of the most significant constitutional and political issues in contemporary India. The passage of the Bill by both Houses of Parliament in September 2023 was widely regarded as the culmination of a legislative struggle spanning nearly three decades. Since its first introduction in 1996, successive governments repeatedly attempted to secure parliamentary approval for reserving one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women, but every effort failed because of political

disagreements over issues such as sub-quotas for Other Backward Classes (OBC) women, rotational reservation, and broader electoral calculations.

Although the enactment of the 2023 law was celebrated as a historic milestone in the constitutional journey towards gender justice and political empowerment, the legislation immediately generated a fresh constitutional and political debate. The Act made its implementation contingent upon two conditions: the conduct of the first Census after the commencement of the Act and the subsequent delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies. While the Union Government defended these provisions as a constitutional and administrative necessity, several opposition parties and women's organisations argued that linking reservation to future Census and delimitation exercises effectively postponed its implementation for an indefinite period. Consequently, the celebration of the legislation soon gave way to renewed political controversy over the government's commitment to ensuring women's political empowerment through the substantive representation in legislatures.

The debate acquired a new dimension during the parliamentary discussions of 2026. The introduction of fresh constitutional and electoral reform proposals relating to delimitation and the implementation framework of the reservation provisions revived the longstanding controversy over whether women's reservation should be made immediately operational or remain dependent upon the completion of the Census and delimitation process. These developments transformed what had appeared to be a settled constitutional question in 2023 into one of the most contested political issues of 2026. The parliamentary debates once again exposed deep differences among political parties regarding the timing, scope, and manner of implementing women's reservation, while simultaneously raising broader constitutional questions concerning electoral justice, federal representation, and democratic inclusion.

Thus, the contemporary debate is no longer centred on whether women should receive political reservation; rather, it concerns when and how the constitutional promise embodied in the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam should be translated into reality. The 2026 discussions demonstrate that, despite an overwhelming parliamentary consensus on the principle of women's political empowerment, disagreements continue regarding the institutional mechanism and constitutional sequencing for its implementation. Consequently, the issue of women's reservation has once again become intertwined with electoral politics, delimitation, and competing visions of democratic representation.

Women's participation in the political process constitutes one of the most important indicators of the quality and inclusiveness of a democratic system. Political empowerment extends beyond the formal right to vote or contest elections; it encompasses meaningful participation in decision-making institutions, equal access to political opportunities, and the ability to influence

public policy. Although the Constitution of India guaranteed universal adult franchise, equality before the law, and equal political rights to women from the very inception of the Republic, descriptive representation of women in Parliament and State Legislatures has remained disproportionately low. This persistent underrepresentation has long been regarded as a democratic deficit, limiting the inclusiveness and legitimacy of representative institutions (Saini, 2017).

The constitutional commitment to gender equality in India did not emerge in isolation. It was the outcome of a long history of women's participation in the national movement, sustained campaigns for social reform, and evolving international norms concerning women's human rights. Following the adoption of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979, the international community increasingly recognised women's equal participation in political and public life as an essential component of democratic governance. Article 7 of CEDAW obliges State Parties to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life by ensuring their equal rights to vote, contest elections, hold public office, and participate in public affairs (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination).

The momentum for affirmative measures gained further strength through the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985), followed by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), which urged governments to adopt institutional mechanisms, including electoral reforms and gender quotas, to achieve balanced political representation. These international developments significantly influenced constitutional reforms across the world, leading many democracies to introduce legislative or constitutional quotas to enhance women's representation in elected bodies.

India's own journey towards legislative reservation for women reflects both domestic constitutional evolution and global commitments to gender equality. The successful implementation of one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-93) demonstrated that constitutional reservation could substantially increase women's participation in governance. However, extending similar reservations to Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies remained politically contentious for nearly three decades (Buragohai, 2026).

The contemporary debate of 2026 must therefore be understood within this broader historical and constitutional context. It represents not merely a disagreement over electoral procedure but the latest phase in India's continuing effort to reconcile constitutional ideals of equality with the practical realities of representative democracy. The implementation of women's reservation has

consequently become a test of India's commitment to substantive democracy, gender justice, and inclusive political representation.

The growing demand for legislative reservation for women must also be viewed in the broader context of global efforts to enhance women's political representation. In 1995, when the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted, women occupied only about 11.3% of parliamentary seats worldwide. Over the past three decades, this figure has increased substantially, reaching approximately 27-28 per cent by 2026. Although the progress has been significant, women continue to remain underrepresented in legislatures across the world, demonstrating that legal equality alone has not been sufficient to ensure equal political participation. One of the principal factors responsible for this improvement has been the adoption of constitutional and statutory gender quotas. Today, more than 130 countries and territories have introduced some form of gender quota, including reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, or voluntary party quotas, to promote women's representation in national legislatures. Comparative studies by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women consistently demonstrate that countries adopting legally enforceable quotas have generally achieved significantly higher levels of women's political representation than those relying solely on voluntary political participation (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women).

The experience of several developing countries illustrates the transformative impact of constitutional reservations. Rwanda continues to lead the world with women constituting 61 percent of the members of its lower house of Parliament. Similarly, countries such as Cuba 53 percent, Bolivia 53.1% the other developing countries like Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates have achieved either gender parity or near-parity in their national legislatures through constitutional provisions or robust quota mechanisms. In contrast, many established democracies continue to record comparatively lower levels of women's representation. Despite their long democratic traditions, countries such as the United Kingdom 32 percent Canada 26 percent and the United States 23.6 percent have yet to achieve equal representation of women in their national legislatures. These international experiences indicate that affirmative constitutional measures often produce faster and more substantive gains in women's political participation than gradual social and political change alone (Women in Parliament: 1995-2025). The average of women Parliamentarian in India is less than 11 percent even after the 70's years of its Independence there are only 74 women MPs in the present 18 Lok Sabha that is slightly lower than 17 Lok Sabha as there were 78 women Parliamentarians then which highest representation of women in the Parliament since the last 70 years (Statistical Reports of Lok Sabha Elections and Vital Stats, Profile of the 18th Lok Sabha).

India presents a contrasting picture regarding the political empowerment and political participation of women. Although Indian women have enjoyed

universal adult franchise and equal constitutional rights since the commencement of the Constitution in 1950, their representation in Parliament has remained comparatively modest. In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), women constitute approximately 13.6 per cent of the total membership, with 74 women Members of Parliament elected to the House. This represents a slight decline from the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), which had 78 women Members, the highest number in India's parliamentary history. By comparison, the First Lok Sabha (1952) had only 22 women Members, reflecting the slow but uneven progress made over seven decades. (Ibid) Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women's parliamentary representation in India has consistently remained well below the global average, thereby strengthening the argument for legislative reservation as an instrument of substantive political equality.

The contemporary debate on the implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 must therefore be understood against this empirical background. The central constitutional question is no longer whether women require greater political representation; rather, it concerns the institutional mechanism and the timeline through which such representation should be secured. The continued delay in operationalising the reservation provisions has renewed concerns regarding India's ability to translate constitutional commitments into effective political empowerment.

The historical evolution of women's rights in India further reinforces the necessity of affirmative political representation. The history of Indian women reveals a long struggle against social exclusion, patriarchal institutions, and legal disabilities that characterized significant periods of ancient, medieval, and colonial India. Although social reform movements of the nineteenth century and women's active participation in the national freedom movement considerably improved their public status, political equality remained largely inspirational until the adoption of the Constitution of India.

The coming into force of the Constitution on 26 January 1950 marked a watershed in the constitutional history of women's rights. The Constitution not only guaranteed equality before the law and equal citizenship under the Preamble and Fundamental Rights but also empowered the State to adopt affirmative measures for achieving substantive equality. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(d), 42, and 51A (e) collectively provide the constitutional foundation for promoting women's social, economic, and political empowerment. In particular, Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make special provisions for women and children, thereby constitutionally legitimizing affirmative action in favour of women (Forbes, 1998).

Constitutional guarantees were subsequently complemented by planned developmental policies. From the very inception of independent India, women's development became an integral component of the country's planning process.

However, the approach adopted during the early decades of planned development was primarily welfare-oriented. The First Five-Year Plan (1951–56) focused on improving maternal and child welfare, social services, and community development programmes aimed at enhancing women’s role within the family and society. The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Five-Year Plans largely continued this welfare-oriented perspective, treating women primarily as beneficiaries of social assistance rather than as equal participants in economic and political development (Department of Women and Child Development, 1986).

A significant shift occurred following the publication of the landmark Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) Report, *Towards Equality* (1974). The Report provided a comprehensive assessment of the declining socio-economic and political status of women despite constitutional guarantees and developmental planning. It exposed persistent inequalities in education, employment, political representation, and access to public resources, fundamentally challenging the assumption that economic development alone would ensure gender equality. The Report generated extensive parliamentary debate and marked a turning point in India’s approach to women’s development.

Influenced by the recommendations of the *Towards Equality* Report and emerging international discourse on gender equality, the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–85) introduced a paradigm shift by replacing the welfare approach with a development-oriented strategy. For the first time, women were recognised as active participants in the development process rather than passive recipients of welfare measures. The Plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with special emphasis on education, health, employment, skill development, and institutional support for women’s empowerment. (Government of India, 1975) This transformation laid the intellectual and policy foundation for subsequent constitutional reforms, including the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which successfully institutionalised one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies and eventually inspired the movement for similar reservations in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies.

The growing demand for legislative reservation for women must also be viewed in the broader context of global efforts to enhance women’s political representation. In 1995, when the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted, women occupied only about 11.3% of parliamentary seats worldwide. Over the past three decades, this figure has increased substantially, reaching approximately 27-28% by 2026. Although the progress has been significant, women continue to remain underrepresented in legislatures across the world, demonstrating that legal equality alone has not been sufficient to ensure equal political participation.

One of the principal factors responsible for this improvement has been the adoption of constitutional and statutory gender quotas. Today, more than 130 countries and territories have introduced some form of gender quota, including reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, or voluntary party quotas, to promote women's representation in national legislatures. Comparative studies by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women consistently demonstrate that countries adopting legally enforceable quotas have generally achieved significantly higher levels of women's political representation than those relying solely on voluntary political participation.

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The historical evolution of women's rights in India further reinforces the necessity of affirmative political representation. The history of Indian women reveals a long struggle against social exclusion, patriarchal institutions, and legal disabilities that characterized significant periods of ancient, medieval, and colonial India. Although social reform movements of the nineteenth century and women's active participation in the national freedom movement considerably improved their public status, political equality remained largely inspirational until the adoption of the Constitution of India.

The coming into force of the Constitution on 26 January 1950 marked a watershed in the constitutional history of women's rights. The Constitution not only guaranteed equality before the law and equal citizenship under the Preamble and Fundamental Rights but also empowered the State to adopt affirmative measures for achieving substantive equality. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(d), 42, and 51A (e) collectively provide the constitutional foundation for promoting women's social, economic, and political empowerment. In particular, Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make special provisions for women and children, thereby constitutionally legitimizing affirmative action in favour of women.

Constitutional guarantees were subsequently complemented by planned developmental policies. From the very inception of independent India, women's development became an integral component of the country's planning process. However, the approach adopted during the early decades of planned development was primarily welfare-oriented. The First Five-Year Plan (1951-56) focused on improving maternal and child welfare, social services, and

community development programmes aimed at enhancing women's role within the family and society. The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Five-Year Plans largely continued this welfare-oriented perspective, treating women primarily as beneficiaries of social assistance rather than as equal participants in economic and political development (Anand, April 6, 1997; Govt. of India, 1995).

The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Five-Year Plans broadly continued the welfare-oriented approach towards women's development adopted during the First Plan. Women's issues were largely treated as part of the broader framework of social welfare, alongside programmes for children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. During this period, women were viewed primarily as beneficiaries of welfare rather than as active participants in the development process (Chetana, 1992).

A significant turning point came with the publication of the landmark report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), titled *Towards Equality* (1974), towards the end of the Fourth Five-Year Plan. The report highlighted that the prevailing model of economic development had, in many respects, adversely affected women by reinforcing existing inequalities and creating new forms of social and economic disparities. Its findings generated extensive debate in Parliament and marked the beginning of a new policy discourse that recognized women not merely as recipients of welfare but as essential contributors to national development. The *Towards Equality* report and the subsequent parliamentary discussions on the impact of the Five-Year Plans played a crucial role in transforming the official approach towards women's development. This shift was reflected in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–85), which marked a decisive departure from the earlier welfare-oriented perspective. For the first time, women were recognized as active participants in the development process rather than passive beneficiaries of welfare programmes. The Plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with a special emphasis on three core sectors—health, education, and employment—to enhance women's socio-economic status.

The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–90) further strengthened this approach by seeking to enhance women's confidence, promote awareness of their rights and capabilities, and expand opportunities for their development. It also emphasized the effective implementation of protective legislation, including the Dowry Prohibition Act, and introduced measures to prevent violence, harassment, and other forms of discrimination against women. The Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992–97) marked another important phase in the institutionalization of women's empowerment. During this period, several key institutions and programmes were established, including the National Commission for Women (1992), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993), Mahila Samridhi Yojana (1993), and Indira Mahila Yojana (1995). The National Policy for the Empowerment of women, although formally adopted in 2001, was conceptualized during this period,

reflecting the growing commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment (National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988).

The 1990s also witnessed a significant shift towards the political empowerment of women at the grassroots level. The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayats and Urban Local Bodies for women, fundamentally transformed local governance by ensuring women's participation in democratic institutions. Building upon this constitutional framework, the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002) identified women's empowerment as one of its central objectives. It sought to create an enabling environment in which women could exercise their rights both within and outside the household as equal partners in development. The Plan also emphasized the formulation and implementation of a comprehensive National Policy for the Empowerment of Women with clearly defined goals, targets, and institutional mechanisms for monitoring gender equality (Anand, 1997).

The commitment to women's empowerment was further strengthened in the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–07), which adopted a three-pronged strategy based on the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001). This strategy focused on social empowerment, economic empowerment, and gender justice, aiming to integrate gender concerns into all sectors of development. (Peerzade Parnade, *March 1*, 2005) The Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–12) continued this trajectory by placing women's empowerment at the centre of its vision of inclusive growth. It envisaged a society in which every woman could realize her full potential and participate equitably in the country's economic and social progress. The Plan emphasized gender mainstreaming across all sectors while also introducing targeted interventions to address persistent gender disparities. It further reiterated the commitment of the Government's National Common Minimum Programme to empower women politically, educationally, economically, and legally. The Plan also aligned its objectives with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), recognizing that gender equality and women's empowerment were essential to improving the overall quality of life for women and children and achieving sustainable national development (Government of India, 2007–2012).

The publication of Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) Report, *Towards Equality* (1974) proved to be landmark for the political empowerment of women in India. The Report provided a comprehensive assessment of the declining socio-economic and political status of women despite constitutional guarantees and developmental planning. It exposed persistent inequalities in education, employment, political representation, and access to public resources, fundamentally challenging the assumption that economic development alone would ensure gender equality. The Report generated extensive parliamentary debate and marked a turning point in India's approach to women's development.

Influenced by the recommendations of the *Towards Equality* Report and emerging international discourse on gender equality, the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-85) introduced a paradigm shift by replacing the welfare approach with a development-oriented strategy. For the first time, women were recognised as active participants in the development process rather than passive recipients of welfare measures. The Plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with special emphasis on education, health, employment, skill development, and institutional support for women's empowerment. This transformation laid the intellectual and policy foundation for subsequent constitutional reforms, including the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which successfully institutionalised one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies and eventually inspired the movement for similar reservations in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies (Bala, 1999).

Following sustained political pressure and advocacy by women's organisations, the process of reserving seats for women in local self-government institutions was initiated during the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The proposal generated considerable political debate. While its supporters viewed it as a transformative step towards enhancing women's political representation and democratic participation, critics argued that it also served as a politically strategic measure aimed at creating a supportive women's constituency at a time when the Indian National Congress was attempting to rebuild its political image.

A decisive breakthrough came with the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 and the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, both of which came into force in 1993 during the government of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao. These constitutional amendments institutionalised democratic decentralisation and mandated that not less than one-third of the total seats in PRIs and ULBs be reserved for women. These provisions marked the first constitutional guarantee of political reservation for women in India and laid the foundation for their large-scale participation in grassroots governance. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment inserted Part IX into the Constitution and introduced Article 243D, which provides the constitutional framework for the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Article 243D (2) mandates that not less than one-third of the seats reserved for the SCs and STs shall be reserved for women belonging to these communities. Article 243D (3) further provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women, with such seats being allotted by rotation among different constituencies. Article 243D (4) extends the principle of reservation to the offices of Chairpersons at all levels of the Panchayati Raj system, authorizing State Legislatures to provide reservation for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes through state legislation (Khan, n.d.).

The constitutional recognition of women's political participation was complemented by several national and international initiatives promoting women's leadership in governance. Various governmental and non-governmental organisations issued recommendations to strengthen women's participation in political decision-making. Regional networks such as South Asia Watch (SAW) and Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW) consistently identified women's political representation as a priority issue. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) organised a national consultation on *Women's Political Participation in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Opportunities* in New Delhi from 24 to 26 March 1999. The consultation brought together women political leaders, policymakers, and civil society representatives from across India to exchange experiences and formulate strategies for increasing women's participation in governance. The meeting concluded that genuine gender equality could not be achieved until women attained equitable representation in political institutions and decision-making processes (Rajput, 2000).

The implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments has significantly transformed the landscape of grassroots democracy in India. Over the past three decades, these reforms have enabled millions of women to enter electoral politics for the first time, thereby expanding their role in public decision-making and local governance. Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has enhanced women's political awareness, leadership skills, and confidence while challenging traditional patriarchal norms that historically excluded them from political processes. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that women's increased representation at the local level has improved responsiveness to issues such as education, health, sanitation, drinking water, and social welfare, thereby strengthening democratic accountability and inclusive governance. The success of the reservation policy has encouraged several states to extend women's reservation beyond the constitutionally mandated one-third. Although the Constitution (110th Amendment) Bill, 2009, which proposed increasing reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions from one-third to one-half, was introduced in Parliament, it was never enacted. Nevertheless, many states independently amended their Panchayati Raj Acts to provide 50% reservation for women.

According to the latest official data, India has approximately 2.55 lakh Gram Panchayats with nearly 2.5 million elected Panchayati Raj representatives, of whom women constitute approximately 49.7%. Several states-including Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal-as well as the Union Territories of Lakshadweep and Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, have provided 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions through their

respective state laws and rules. This expansion has substantially enhanced women's participation in grassroots governance and has contributed to the emergence of a new generation of women political leaders, thereby reinforcing the democratic process and advancing gender-inclusive governance in India.

Evolution of women's reservation: from legislative deadlock to the 2026 implementation debate

The demand for reserving seats for women in Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies emerged as a major political issue during the mid-1990s. The success of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which introduced one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, generated widespread support for extending similar provisions to the higher legislatures. Consequently, in the run-up to the 1996 general elections, most major political parties included a commitment to provide 33% reservation for women in Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies in their election manifestos. Although there was broad political consensus regarding the principle of enhancing women's representation, significant differences soon emerged over the design and implementation of the proposed reservation.

The first Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in September 1996 by the United Front Government led by Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda as the Constitution (81st Amendment) Bill, 1996. The Bill proposed reserving one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women, including one-third of the seats already reserved for the SCs and STs. However, the Bill immediately encountered strong political opposition and was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee chaired by Geeta Mukherjee. The Geeta Mukherjee Committee strongly endorsed the principle of women's reservation and recommended the passage of the Bill with only limited modifications. At the same time, the Committee rejected the demand for separate sub-quotas for women belonging to OBCs and minority communities within the proposed reservation. This recommendation reflected the view that such demands, although raising legitimate questions of social justice, were not accompanied by corresponding efforts by political parties to provide adequate representation to OBC and minority women within their own organisational structures or candidate selection processes. Consequently, supporters of the Bill often argued that the demand for sub-quotas had become a political strategy that repeatedly delayed the enactment of women's reservation (National Legislators' Conference Bharat).

Between 1996 and 2010, successive governments introduced the Women's Reservation Bill several times under different constitutional amendment numbers. Despite repeated assurances across party lines, the Bill failed to secure parliamentary approval because of intense political disagreements over issues

such as sub-quotas for OBC women, the rotation of reserved constituencies, and concerns that reservation might disproportionately benefit urban, educated and politically influential women. On several occasions, parliamentary proceedings were disrupted by unprecedented protests, reflecting the deep divisions surrounding the proposal. Thus, although political parties publicly endorsed women's political empowerment, the inability to enact the legislation exposed the gap between rhetorical commitment and legislative action (Panda & Ford, 2011).

A significant breakthrough occurred on 9 March 2010 when the Rajya Sabha passed the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, by an overwhelming majority, with 186 members voting in favour and only one member voting against it. The Bill sought to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women, including a sub-reservation for SC and ST women within the existing reserved constituencies. The passage of the Bill in the Rajya Sabha represented an important milestone in India's constitutional history and reflected an unprecedented degree of political consensus regarding the need to improve women's representation in legislative institutions (Agnihotri, *April 9, 2010*).

Nevertheless, the Bill was never taken up for consideration in the Lok Sabha. With the dissolution of the 14th Lok Sabha in 2014, it lapsed, marking yet another unsuccessful attempt to institutionalise women's reservation at the national level. The fate of the 2010 Bill demonstrated that although political consensus existed in principle, competing electoral calculations and unresolved questions concerning the structure of reservation continued to impede legislative reform.

The issue remained largely dormant until September 2023, when the Union Government introduced the Constitution (128th Amendment) Bill, 2023, officially titled the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. Unlike the earlier attempts, the legislation received overwhelming support in both Houses of Parliament and subsequently received the assent of the President, becoming part of the Constitution. The enactment represented the culmination of nearly three decades of constitutional and political debate on women's reservation in Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies.

However, the constitutional amendment did not provide for the immediate implementation of reservation. Instead, it stipulated that the reservation of seats would become operational only after the publication of the first Census conducted following the commencement of the Act and the subsequent delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies. This constitutional linkage between reservation, Census, and delimitation fundamentally transformed the nature of the debate. Whereas earlier discussions focused primarily on whether reservation should be introduced, contemporary

discussions increasingly centre on the conditions, timing, and institutional mechanisms necessary for its implementation.

The debate acquired renewed significance during 2026 as the Union Government initiated the legislative process relating to delimitation and the operationalisation of the constitutional provisions governing women's reservation. Consequently, the focus of public and academic discourse shifted from the normative justification for reservation towards the constitutional, political and administrative challenges involved in translating the constitutional mandate into electoral reality.

The contemporary debate revolves around several interconnected issues. First, there are concerns regarding the timing of the next delimitation exercise and its implications for the federal balance between states. Secondly, there is continuing debate regarding the method of identifying constituencies that will be reserved for women and the criteria governing the rotation of reserved seats. Frequent rotation has generated apprehension among political parties and legislators, who argue that it may weaken constituency accountability, discourage long-term political investment, and reduce incentives for sustained constituency development. Thirdly, political parties and several regional organisations have renewed the demand for a separate sub-quota for women belonging to OBCs, arguing that gender justice should also reflect India's existing patterns of social inequality. These concerns demonstrate that the implementation of women's reservation remains closely intertwined with broader debates on social justice, representation and electoral fairness.

Under the constitutional framework established by the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, one-third of the total seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies will be reserved for women. Within the constituencies already reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, one-third will be further reserved for women belonging to these communities, thereby creating a quota within the existing reservation framework. The Constitution further provides that Parliament shall determine the detailed mechanism governing the rotation of reserved constituencies through subsequent legislation after the completion of the delimitation process. The underlying objective of rotation is to ensure that the benefits of reservation are distributed equitably across constituencies and that women's political participation is not confined to a limited geographical or social base.

Viewed historically, the evolution of the Women's Reservation Bill illustrates the changing trajectory of women's political empowerment in India. The debates of the 1990s and 2000s were largely concerned with securing constitutional recognition for women's legislative representation. In contrast, the debate in 2026 reflects a more advanced stage in which the constitutional principle has been accepted, while the principal challenge lies in designing an implementation

framework that balances gender equality with competing concerns of federalism, social justice, electoral stability and democratic representation. The effectiveness of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam will therefore depend not only upon its constitutional validity but also upon the manner in which Parliament addresses the practical questions relating to Census, delimitation, rotation of constituencies, and the demands for more inclusive representation during its implementation.

Conclusion

The enactment of the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023* marks a historic constitutional milestone in India's long struggle to secure substantive political equality for women. As this paper demonstrates, the demand for legislative reservation evolved from the success of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, the recommendations of the *Towards Equality* Report (1974), and India's international commitments under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. However, the 2026 parliamentary debate reveals that constitutional recognition alone does not guarantee effective political empowerment. By linking implementation to the Census and delimitation, the constitutional amendment has shifted the debate from the legitimacy of reservation to the timing and institutional framework of its enforcement.

To fulfil the constitutional promise of gender justice, Parliament should ensure the time-bound implementation of the reservation provisions immediately after the completion of the Census and delimitation process. The implementation framework should be transparent, accompanied by clear rules on the rotation of reserved constituencies, and informed by broad political consultation. Simultaneously, political parties should strengthen women's participation through internal candidate selection, leadership development, and capacity-building initiatives. Ultimately, the success of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam will be measured not merely by its constitutional enactment but by its effective contribution to achieving substantive equality, democratic inclusion, and meaningful representation of women in India's legislative institution.

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Political awareness and democratic governance in India: challenges and prospects

Prakash Chand & Bhawana Jharta

ABSTRACT

Political awareness constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the effective functioning of democratic governance. It enables citizens to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, hold public institutions accountable, and contribute to the legitimacy of democratic governance. The present article is an attempt to conceptualize the idea of political awareness and the process of democratic governance and analyze the role of political awareness in democratic governance. It examines the interrelationship between political awareness and democratic governance, as well as the challenges and prospects of political awareness in the context of democratic governance, both generally and with specific reference to India. Moreover, the study provides practical recommendations to improve democratic governance through increase in political consciousness. Methodologically, the study is based on secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, journals, newspapers, and relevant online materials. Both historical and descriptive approaches have been employed to analyze the subject.

Keywords: *Political Awareness, Democratic Governance, Participation, Citizens, Accountability.*

Introduction

Political awareness is the key to establishing a democratic society based on accountability, transparency, and good governance. Democracies, thus, depend upon active and informed citizen participation for their development and continuity. Politically aware citizens contribute to democratic sustainability by critically scrutinizing government actions, inactions, programs, and policies (Badaru, et al., 2021). Political awareness encompasses citizen's understanding of political systems, governance mechanism, rights, duties, and the institutional processes that influence public life. It empowers citizens to make informed decisions, participate actively in democracy, hold leaders accountable, and contribute to the stability and development of democratic societies.

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In a democratic society, the legitimacy of authority stems from the informed participation of the people. Politically aware citizens are integral to the cultivation of a robust and healthy democracy, as they remain well-informed about governmental actions, initiatives and policies. While active engagement in formal political processes is not obligatory for every politically aware individual, it is not nonetheless essential for citizen to remain informed about ongoing political developments within their society. Informed citizens are better equipped to make rational decisions during elections, understand policy debates and hold leaders accountable. By holding leaders accountable and advocating for long term public policies, aware citizens help reduce political apathy, corruption and instability.

In India, political awareness has evolved in tandem with democratic governance and has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's political institutions and participatory democratic practices. The roots of political awareness in India can be traced back to the pre-independence period, when the freedom movement mobilized large sections of the population against colonial rule. Early socio-religious reform movements and political organizations-initiated discussions on rights, representation and self-governance. However, political awareness became more organized and widespread during the Indian national movement under the leadership of Lokmanaya Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, B. R. Ambedkar, Subas Chandra Bose, among others (Ramsharan, 2014). The freedom struggle mobilized diverse sections of society across regional, social and economic divisions through movements such as non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and other mass protests. This period witnessed the emergence of mass political consciousness, which laid the foundation for democratic governance in independent India.

In the post-independence era, political awareness was institutionalized and strengthened through constitutional and democratic mechanism. The adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950 established universal adult suffrage, guaranteed fundamental rights, and created a parliamentary system of governance, thereby ensuring citizen participation in political processes. Extension of education and literacy has helped to improve citizen's knowledge about democracy and governance processes. Mass media and the speedy development of digital communication channels have broadened the reach of political information and enhanced the participation of the public in politics. In addition, the role of civil society organizations, social movements, has increased and democratic awareness with decentralized governance including through Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies has been strengthened. The democratic governance of a country is only, going to take root if citizens have knowledge and information in relation to their political surroundings. This system is based upon the premise that people are well aware and able to elect best

representatives to run the government. Without awareness of people no democratic governance can be successful (Kaur, 2022).

As a component of citizenship, political awareness will be critical to active and meaningful involvement in democratic governance processes. The civic education of its citizens is essential to make governance legitimate, open and beneficial to the community. But a number of structural and socio-political impediments remain in the way of political consciousness building. They embrace deep-rooted inequalities, stark regional differences, inadequate political knowledge, misinformation being peddled and a general loss of faith in political processes. Educational opportunities, systematic fostering of youth engagement, strategic use of digital governance platforms and increase of democratic participation of civil society organizations can all help raise political awareness and enhance democratic participation (Thakur & Negi, 2024). On the other hand, insufficient political consciousness can lead to the development of political apathy, loss of individuals' political efficacy and be an enabler of undemocratic influences. So, politics is an unavoidable precondition of maintaining a democratic polity which is accountable, responsive and firmly rooted in human rights and social equity principles.

Conceptual framework

Awareness originates from Germanic roots, specifically the old English word 'waer' meaning "wary" or "cautious." The term denotes a state of continuous perception or cognition- a condition of knowing and understanding ongoing events or circumstances. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, awareness is defined as the state of being fully conscious of relevant stimuli and genuinely engaging with a task or situation. Grammatically, awareness functions as a noun derived from aware, which signifies possessing knowledge, consciousness, or information concerning particular phenomena, processes, activities, or issues. According to Carter V. Good (1959) awareness means the "state of being aware" or "consciousness of situation". Awareness is the totality of individual's assessment, knowledge and even understanding of things. It develops and grows together with the growth and development of human life. Awareness is understood as the perception of the self and his surrounding environment (Hermosa, 2021). Awareness refers to the ability to perceive, experience, and maintain conscious understanding of events, objects, thoughts, emotions, and sensory patterns. At its core, awareness encompasses the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and respond to one's environment and experiences. Political awareness refers to an individual's informed understanding of political processes, systems, rights and civic duties, serving as a crucial factor in shaping democratic participation. It acts as a key determinant of active engagement in political life, influencing both personal empowerment and broader societal progress. Political awareness refers to the knowledge and information of persons about their political system (Kaur, et al., 2019). It encompasses a practical grasp

of how politics operates on a daily basis and how it affects citizens' lives. Moreover, political awareness involves the capacity to think critically about the political system- its organization, decision-making processes, and overall effectiveness in addressing societal needs. According to Mukhopadhyay (1977) 'political awareness constitutes a critical determinant in comprehending the political system and serves as an impetus for political participation.' Luskin (1990) defines political awareness 'as a composite construct encompassing three key dimensions: the degree of exposure to political information, the cognitive capacity to process, retain, and organize such information and the motivational disposition to seek and interpret political content.'

Similarly, Carpini et al. (1996) define political knowledge as the range of factual information about politics that is retained in long-term memory or acquired through interpersonal discussion. For Ahmed & Ahmed (2011) political awareness refers to 'the overall vision or individual's cognitions and ideas that include political interest and knowledge which facilitate the individual's ability and understanding of society's problem. This process stimulates the individual's responsibility towards participating to change the society's future and political process through participating in social and political aspects.' Political awareness encompasses access to political information, engagement in political participation, media exposure, interest in political affairs, and education attainment (Rahman, et al., 2018). Political awareness involves having an understanding of basic constitutional issues, key pieces of legislation, major socio-political events and current political activity that help to influence society. Broadly, political awareness embodies an informed and reflective engagement with political phenomena, an active involvement in civic and political processes, continuous monitoring of political discourse through various media, and an enduring intellectual interest in political issues.

Democracy and governance

The term 'democracy' was first used in the fifth century BCE by the Greek historian Herodotus to denote the concept of rule by the people. Etymologically, the word democracy is derived from two Greek terms: *demos*, meaning "the people", and *kratein*, meaning "to rule". Thus, democracy refers to a form of government in which ultimate political authority is vested in the hands of people. Abraham Lincoln famously defined democracy as "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people". Janda, et al., (1992) emphasized that 'democracy denotes authority that resides in or is exercised by the people'. According to Guy Hermet (1991), 'democracy should not be understood as a type of society but, more precisely, as a form of political system'. Huntington (1991) further argued that 'democracy exists where the principal leaders of a political system are chosen through competitive elections in which the majority of the population is afforded the opportunity to participate.'

The concept of governance is not new. However, it has assumed particular significance in recent years, especially within the literature on African development. The term governance is derived from the Greek word 'kubernao', meaning "to steer" or "to guide." Originally, it referred primarily to the act or manner of governing, guiding, or steering conduct and was largely synonymous with government. Governance may be understood as the process through which authority and power are exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources (Halder, 2004). According to the Webster Dictionary of the English Language, governance denotes control or authority. The Oxford English Dictionary defines governance as the act of directing and controlling actions and affairs, whether political or constitutional. It further describes governance as the manner or process of governing, controlling, directing, or regulating. In broad terms, governance refers to the exercise of authority by the state to promote the well-being of its citizens. It encompasses both the processes through which decisions are made and the mechanisms through which those decisions are implemented. In the 1990s, the United Nations further defines the concept of governance as the exercise of political, economic, and administrative authority in the management of a nation's affairs. Gerry Stoker argues that governance is fundamentally concerned with establishing the conditions required for ordered rule and effective collective action.

Democratic governance is a system of governance in which the principles of transparency, accountability, participation, inclusivity, and the rule of law inform and regulate decision-making processes and the exercise of authority. It ensures that political institutions function with legitimacy and that governments remain accountable to the citizenry. In contrast to authoritarian systems, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, democratic governance advances people-centered policies, thereby enabling citizens to participate meaningfully in shaping the political, economic, and social development of their country. The effectiveness of democratic governance is evidenced by a nation's capacity to sustain political stability, attract economic investment, and ensure equitable opportunities for all citizens (Kumari, 2025). Democratic governance may be defined as the collaborative interaction between the state and citizens, including civil society actors, aimed at fostering partnerships, networks, coordination mechanism, negotiation processes, dialogue, consensus building and inclusion in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies (Bevir, 2006; Ingrams, 2019; Strebel et al., 2019). Democratic governance serves as one of the key building blocks to foster political stability, grow social equity, and lay the groundwork for sustainable economic development, especially when alongside structural constraints and institutional barriers.

Relationship between political awareness and democratic governance

Political awareness and democratic governance are linked directly, deeply, and in a mutually reinforcing way. Political awareness leads to strengthening of

democratic institutions and their working efficacy. If citizens are unaware, ignorant and unable to meaningfully engage in politics, democracy would not work. The essence is political awareness and the process of democratic governance that is sustained by it is the outcome. It can be explained in multiple ways that are all interrelated, each of which provides insight into the ways in which an informed electorate supports and contributes to democracy. Political awareness allows citizens to take a role in the political process by helping them to understand their rights, responsibilities, political systems and policies, so they can take advantage of the democratic system, such as voting in elections and sharing their voices in other democratic processes. It enhances accountability and transparency, enabling informed citizens to monitor government operations, challenge policy choices and hold their leaders accountable through the conventions of the constitution and democracy. Further, political awareness helps to uphold the rule of law and the protection of rights through a mindset of respect for constitutional values and resistance to arbitrary and authoritarian use or exercise of power. It fosters participatory and inclusive governance by helping to drive some civic involvement in governance, for instance, after the next elections, and gives voice to neglected groups of society in decision-making.

Democratic governance also gives institutions and structures for political awareness, in turn. The free flow of information, expression and the citizen's ability to gauge government activities through their own agency and opinions is fostered by constitutional protection of freedom of speech and expression and the right to information in India. The universal franchise for adult and regular, competitive elections also actively fosters political consciousness as adults can be directly engaged in election for their representatives and in political campaigns, policy discussion and party manifestos. Besides, democratic institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, the Election Commission, and local government institutions perform a very significant role in raising political awareness through transparency and outward participation. Citizens gain knowledge through debates in parliament, a better understanding of constitutional principles and the rule of law from judicial decisions and participation in local governance institutions at the grassroots level. Democratic governance and a free and independent media also play a supporting role in the development of political awareness: Information is disseminated, informed debates are promoted, opinion is formed. These factors show that political consciousness and democratic governance go hand-in-hand, and that the two together create a 'virtuous cycle', which is necessary to the effectiveness, stability and quality of democratic government.

Empirical studies in political science have over and over again shown robust and consistent link between political awareness and the quality of democratic government. Almond and Verba (1963) have maintained that democracy is most

likely to work when citizens are politically knowledgeable and oriented toward public life. They refer to this mixture as a ‘civic culture,’ which involves informed citizens participating in political processes to strengthen the stability, legitimacy, and responsiveness of democratic processes. In the work of Robert Dahl, (1971), informed participation can be heard in a similar guise; Dahl parlays the concept of “polyarchy.” Dahl identifies ‘enlightened understanding’ as one of the prerequisites of democracy requiring that citizens are provided with information that is accurate and that they can, critically evaluate. It is political awareness that allows us to make a reasoned judgement, to have a wider inclusion, to be able to contest, in a meaningful way, the public sphere, and for which he aimed in making this product,” he said.

Likewise, building on this, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959), lays solid empirical foundations for the relationship between education, political consciousness and democratic stability. Liberalism, economic development, and political awareness are factors that lead to the long-term preservation of democratic institutions, argues Lipset. In these societies people are better informed and thus more capable of participating responsibly, assessing the government, and resisting tendencies toward authoritarianism. From the Indian perspective, the concept of Rajni Kothari (1970) is nuanced in terms of the deepening of political awareness that is conducive to furthering of democracy. He notes that political consciousness among marginalized communities (such as lower castes and rural masses) has made participation more inclusive than the traditional elites. It has made Indian democracy more inclusive and participatory, as before former times, the excluded segments are asserting their voice in the political process and exercising their political rights.

Another piece of empirical evidence for this is the study carried out by Amartya Sen (1999) which stresses the importance of political sensitivity to render the government accountable. Democratic freedoms, especially access to information, a free press, and public debate, place power in the hands of citizens to check on the government’s handlings of matters, and to push for change, argue Sen. He notes that intelligent and attentive people can force policies to be taken seriously by governments and avoid the widespread devastation in policy implementation. Yet there are some complexities in the connection between political awareness and democratic governance. Political awareness can be misinformed and media-manipulated, as cautioned by Noam Chomsky and Herman (1988). In this instance, citizens might feel they are receiving good information when they in fact are receiving a skewed or misleading set. In this case, citizens could think that they are receiving good information, but, in fact, they may be receiving biased or incomplete information. This “manufactured” awareness can have deleterious effects on democracy, influencing democratic decision making, even in democracies, and increasing polarization. As a whole, such academic ideas have demonstrated that political consciousness is a critical

aspect rather than a secondary element that supports democracy. It allows better participation, better decision-making by the public, better accountability and better inclusiveness. Meanwhile, the ability of the political awareness to drive effective change depends on the quality of the political awareness itself, whether it is accurate and balanced information or manipulated by misinformation. So that for the working of the democracy to be effective it is not only necessary to broaden this political awareness but it is equally essential to keep it informed, critical and known to all segments of the society.

Political awareness in action

Political awareness is an important component of the democratic system and its development. Yet it builds the intellectual and analytical abilities of citizens which allow them to participate in political institutions and processes in an educated and meaningful way. Political awareness helps resolve the psychological tension of conflicting beliefs and values as different elements of an individual's self-image conflict, paving the way to rational thinking and thoughtful participation in civil society. Moreover, political awareness also helps the citizens to obtain knowledge about their rights, responsibilities and mutual commitments with the nation and society. It fosters political activism-whether in the countryside or in the city-and motivates involvement in Parliamentary decision-making and governance. The extent and intensity of such participation is directly tied to the extent and depth of the educational and socialization process with exposure to civic discourse which provides the springboard to political consciousness. Political awareness, apart from enhancing the democratic participation, also plays a role in the overall trajectory of development of the state.

Political awareness maintains the vitality of democratic processes in that it helps contribute to civic apathy's transcendence, to the responsiveness of the government to the citizens, and to the progress of society through citizen participation. Political awareness gives empowerment to citizens through an overall understanding of the working of the political institutions. An informed electorate enables it to make informed decisions at elections, hold public officials account, and engage in meaningful in civic processes and enhances the core principles of democracy. Engaging in public dialogue expands political awareness, which can lead to engagement in policy formation, and can help to build transparency, accountability, and responsiveness within leadership. It fosters critical thinking, allows citizens to judge politically conflicting information on a balanced basis and respect the other viewpoints of society – which are elements of an inclusive and participatory political culture. Furthermore, politically aware people acquire a good sense of civic efficacy, knowing that they can influence governance outcomes by their actions. This awareness is driven by the actions of participation in voting, advocacy, and community development.

Political awareness also helps to foster civic responsibility through an appreciation of diversity, tolerance and the rule of law. Citizens understand that democracy is more than just rights obliged to its responsibilities, such as participation in the civic life and respect for fair and democratic results. Moreover, it serves as a safety net to counteract techniques of manipulation and misinformation. Citizens in societies which are lacking in political literacy are vulnerable to the propagandists, populism and divisive talking points. Politically knowledgeable citizens on the other hand are better able to communicate between fact and falsehood, better able to make decisions based on evidence, ability and policy and not on emotional or sectarian appeals. The responsive attitude of the public to policy is also strengthened when citizens are aware of their needs and expectations and can articulate to policy makers. If government institutions have continual and constructive input from people, they will be more likely to make policies that are empowering, fair and effective, that meet people's desires. In a democratic system, political awareness is crucial as it enables citizens to make informed decisions, hold leaders accountable and participate in meaningful political discussions (Tomy, et al., 2022). It helps to ensure that governments operate and are responsive to the people in a democratic manner.

Politically aware citizens are the real pillars of democracy in participating in various political activities. They play an active role that leads to positive social and political change, supports institution building and that upholds the democratic process. Citizens may be unaware of their political rights and not be motivated to properly use them or take part in political debates without awareness, which can lead to a weakening of democratic governance. Thus, democracies can be successful and the will of citizens with political awareness is decisive for their course. Political awareness also bears a decisive role in the formation of public opinion and in its participation in the political process. It enables people to be active participants informing themselves especially when it comes to voting or civic activity. Individuals with a political consciousness will be challenge dominant norms and to promote progressive reforms, positively impacting on their families, communities and society in general.

Political consciousness helps them to think wisely about election and elect worthy leaders that best serve the public interest. It fosters wider political engagement – those who feel they understand political systems are more inclined to cast their vote, engage in political discussion and hold their policymakers to account. It helps citizens to critically read, discuss and raise their voice on behalf of a democratic discussion on the decisions that have been taken by the government. A conjoint and widespread political awareness not only promotes the strengthening of collective bargaining but creates the informed public opinion, which, taken together, helps in the development of a people-oriented policy both at the grassroots and at the national and state levels.

Political awareness informs citizens to respond to political system critically, maintaining democracy that is responsive, resilient and truly representative. The more politically knowledgeable they are the greater their propensity to take part in democratic processes like voting, advocacy and public discussion. This involvement not only promotes quality democracy, but it also contributes to accountability in government institutions. As formal education and exposure to the media increase, the knowledge and understanding of citizens regarding political system and institutional responsibilities and policy implications are becoming increasingly complex. In general, political awareness enhances the quality of governance, increase civic participation, and acts as a check on the authoritarian tendencies. In contrast, ignorance of politics, on the other hand, reduces the vitality of democracy by reducing the level of democratic awareness through a process of apathy, misinformation, polarization and political inequality.

Political consciousness likewise is essential to determining people predispositions and impacts on their political orientations. Predispositions and receptivity to information among individuals are likely to be stronger when political awareness is high. Political awareness is likely to lead to more responsibilities and policy implications are becoming increasingly complex. In general, political awareness enhances the quality of governance, increase civic participation, and acts as a check on the authoritarian tendencies. In contrast, ignorance of politics, on the other hand, reduces the vitality of democracy by reducing the level of democratic awareness through a process of apathy misinformation, polarization and political inequality.

Politically aware are less likely to accept information contrary to their beliefs, and less likely to be swayed by outside factors like election campaigns and media scandals, than are those with less awareness. This result, then, into political messages and events having more effect on less politically aware people. The highly informed citizens on the other hand, are exposed to more political information but consume less of it because they critically assess the congruence of the information with their existing beliefs (Kristensen, et al., 2022). Political awareness not only helps raise awareness of the political environment, but also widens the scope of political thinking. More highly aware people have more and more integrated (and coherent) justifications to inform their judgements about politics. Such mature deliberations are more like their dispositions and in turn, shape more stable and coherent political dispositions.

Political awareness fosters overall capability of informed political participation, wider critical communication and increased political tolerance and respect for different points of view. In relation to the concept of democracy, the awareness level would be an essential part of the good citizen within this model of the government. When a population is informed, it has knowledge about the functions and duties of political institutions- such as those of the Executive, the

Legislature and the Judiciary. This awareness can help citizens make informed decisions about their governors, and use the democratic process of elections, referendums or public petition to hold them to account. The better citizen's political awareness leads to better advocacy for policy reform favorable to the public good and hence to governance outcome.

An informed public exercises pressure on policies that are more “inclusive, sustainable and evidence based” than short term “populist policies” for a limited slice of the population. For instance, greater political awareness of issues such as climate change, public health or economic inequality can drive more comprehensive and long-term policy solution. Besides, political awareness equips the quality of governance through innovation and promoting processes that leaders can turn to the problems they are facing. A politically consciousness electorate is more likely to seek innovative and visionary solutions, to hold the government responsible for solving urgent social problems. On the other hand, if the government is unaware of or disinterested in politics, then there may be stagnation in the policy making process as public needs may not be by the government.

Political awareness also underpins the effectiveness of democratic institutions. By fostering a more engaged citizenry, political awareness strengthens the legitimacy of institutions, ensuring that they remain responsive to the needs and concerns of the public. Furthermore, citizens with high political awareness are more likely to demand transparency and accountability, thereby promoting good governance practices. Political awareness has also paved the way for the development of a more transparent system for the execution of development projects undertaken by administrative and technical authorities. The level of political awareness among people in developed countries is generally high because they actively participate in political activities, government development programmes, decision making processes, policy-making and engage meaningfully in administrative and governance processes.

Politically aware citizens develop positive attitudes toward the functioning of the state and contribute voluntarily to the welfare of society, without waiting for directives or coercive measures from authorities. Political awareness promotes political freedom, mutual tolerance, civic responsibility and an appreciation of the guiding principles and values that define a society. It nurtures mutual trust and enhances political participation, laying the foundation for a just, fair and equitable social order. So, it is essential for every citizen to remain informed and engaged with political developments, not only within their own nation but also at the global level.

Educational studies in the discipline of Political Science and Public Policy in India have shown that the awareness of the political is the backbone of a good democratic government. The findings from research clearly indicate that

awareness among citizens regarding political issues, party manifestos and political party profiles, play an important role in increasing the electoral participation significantly as revealed through the findings of the large-scale research conducted by Yadav (2020) and Kumar (2019). This connection is further enhanced as evidenced by the efforts taken by the Election Commission of India (ECI) through programmes like the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP), which have been working effectively to create awareness and strongly encourage more people, especially the youth and first-time voters to cast their votes in every assembly and election. This way, voter apathy is reduced and active civic participation is encouraged.

Political awareness, which is improved by greater participation, also increases the quality of electoral decision making. As revealed by research conducted by the researchers Chhibber and Verma (2018), informed voters chose to vote based on governance performance, public policies and development outcomes as opposed to only focusing on narrow identity factors like caste religion. This transition from party-oriented to issue-oriented voting increases entrusting of substantive aspects of democracy, which encourages political actors to focus on policy and performance rather than identity.

Political awareness is also key in consolidating accountability and administrative responsiveness. The examples from field experiments in the articles by Banerjee and Duflo (2011) illustrate that when citizens hear or read about their entitlements and rights, and about government policies and programs and the importance of having the information accessible in front of them, they are more likely to suspect irregularities and demand transparency from government officials. The Social audits with schemes like MGNREGA (now VB-G RAM-G) under the processes of increasing awareness can act as a mechanism towards lowering corruption and moulding service delivery. Political awareness thus changes the passive attitude of citizens into an active one in governance.

Moreover, political awareness promotes participatory and inclusive governance through making citizens engage beyond voting. This empowers citizens to participate in public deliberation, community decision making and local governance institutions like Panchayati Raj. It is especially important for women and those that belong to marginalized communities such as the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, who have gained more awareness to be represented and have become more engaged, which has improved the inclusiveness of the democratic process.

Key challenges

Political understanding is an essential ingredient for good democratic reform. But it is hampered by several difficulties. One of the primary obstacles with regard to political awareness is that spread of false and misleading information

is also one of the major challenges to political awareness. Today the dissemination of unverified political information can occur quickly through modern means of communication, particularly social media. Widespread misinformation can result in political opinions that are incorrect, and this can lead to democracy undermining itself. Moreover, there is a lack of good information on political processes and democratic values in many education systems. Therefore, the citizens generally lack knowledge about the working of government and the processes used to make policy and about active involvement in processes of government.

Media influence is growing and deepening polarization are also having a severe impact on public discourse, resulting in the rise of polarization of ideas and lack of meaningful deliberation and thus impacting on overall quality of democratic governance. Further, long-term economic difficulties and social inequality reinforce a lack of political awareness and civic involvement. Those who are primarily concerned with lack of money or job are not only free enough to stay well-informed, but they may well have the resources and information they need. There are deeply entrenched socio-cultural practices in some societies which restrict open and active political engagement and discussion, particularly amongst women. Citizens are sometimes reluctant to voice their opinions openly because of the fear of facing social criticism, or even possible repercussions at the political level. They are barriers that impact individuals, women, and minorities more than others and that limit inclusive democratic participation.

Besides, political apathy occurs when those who are citizens take a very negative attitude towards public affairs. This often stems from issues of corruption within the system, distrust in governmental structures and power – and failure of governments to reflect on people's concerns. Consequently, less people turn out for voting and citizens turn away from substantive political discussion, in the process undermining the basis of democratic participation. Further, institutional drawbacks such as opacity, a cumbersome bureaucracy and information gaps between the state and the people hinder political awareness and meaningful public engagement. Such conditions are a combination of misinformation, lack of awareness about civic, polarization, economic disparities, cultural differences, unresponsive political participation, institutional and process limitations and have a reinforcing effect on lessening dalliance of governance in Indian democracy.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis, thus, there is a direct, deep and mutually reinforcing linkage between political awareness and democratic governance. Political awareness not only promotes democratic institutions, but also helps to ensure their proper operation. Democratic governance also, in turn, gives rise to the institutional and constitutional framework for the development of political awareness. In India,

has grown significantly in recent decades, stimulated by increasing literacy rates, the general diffusion of mass media and the quick growth of digital communication platforms. The expansion in political information have greatly increased the scope available to political information users, which has helped improve citizen involvement in public life.

Civic and democratic participation have been driven to a great extent by democratic institutions, particularly electoral processes, political parties and civil society organizations. On numerous occasions, they have affected participatory norms, public discourse, political mobilization, and competitive elections, which have had a profound impact on strengthening democratic accountability. This means citizens have a greater sense of themselves as players of the political game and as citizens with an agenda. The enhanced awareness is seen in higher political participation in the forms of voting, greater participation in political discussions in public space, and more citizen's involvement in local, regional, and national democratic processes.

The participation of the youth, women and civil society organizations further highlights the ongoing rise in political consciousness and extension of democratic engagement among Indian society's various groups. Notwithstanding these promising advances, the study notes several disabling structural socio-political and socio-economic issues that prevail in limiting the potential development of political awareness. There are limitations to meaningful and informed participation due to socio-economic inequality, stark regional differences, inadequate access to high quality political education, and the wide diffusion of misinformation. They disproportionately impact on marginalized groups such as the rural population, women and economically disadvantaged groups, reinforcing inequalities patterns of political exclusion and marginalized.

Furthermore, political disengagement, institutional corruption, the mobilization along ethnic lines, and citizens lack of faith in political and administrative structures hinder the effective operation of democratic governance, as well as citizen's political awareness and awareness of political issues. When the credibility and confidence of institutions, or peoples, erodes, that means people have less incentive to engage in deliberation and that decreases the normative bases of democracy. In sum, although political awareness has clearly improved in India, it must consolidate through working on structural inequalities, improving civic education, educating young people on how to resist spreading misinformation and restore trust in democratic institutions. Insufficient depth, legitimacy and resilience in democratic governance and low levels of citizen's political awareness can be achieved only by means of ongoing institutional reform and participatory practices that are fully inclusive to citizens.

The future prospects and policy recommendations

The political transparencies and democratic governance in India are encouraging and are likely to grow, with further steps expected as educational opportunities grow, involvement of youth rises, digitalization of governance model expands, and civil society emerges as a force to be reckoned with. But, unlocking this potential will need a focused portfolio of actions that will empower citizens to participate, and promote informed citizen's participation at the same time developing the accountability of institutions. To maintain and consolidate the democracy in India, it is integral to deal with structural and socio-political solutions through holistic civic education, better transparency and greater accountability mechanism.

The constitutional system, institutional framework and socio-political development of the state will remain central to political awakening in a democratic state. The Constitution of India has certainly laid a vibrant foundation for citizen's participation through various fundamental rights, e.g., freedom of speech and expression, Right to Information and universal adult suffrage. These will not only enhance partnership but will also bring the principles of accountability, transparency and representation to the forefront.

Education and public awareness regarding these rights will continue to be an important key to consolidate democratic practices. Adoption of civic education into the education program, including its incorporation into the school and higher education curriculum can provide excellent opportunities for further improvement in political literacy for all segments of society. It should be complemented with promoting media literacy that will allow citizens to be effective with evaluating information and also challenging misinformation. Further initiatives of the Election Commission of India as the SVEEP should be enhanced for increasing the awareness regarding the electoral processes and responsive voting behavior of the people among institutions.

The fast and rapid transformation of digital media and E-governance initiatives, such as Digital India, will continue to bring new freedom of access in terms of information, transparency and communication between the State and citizens. These benefits can be maximized through ensuring inclusivity in digital and promoting responsible and informed public discourse on digital spaces. At the same time, civic education should be promoted by civil society organizations and grassroots movements to increase civic engagement and rights awareness to demand accountability and hold power to account.

Furthermore, the active involvement of citizens through community forms of citizen's engagement (public forums, consultations and local governance platforms, amongst others) ought to be encouraged to ensure that citizens are afforded the opportunity to contribute their ideas to the development of policy. Greater transparency, streamlined administrative processes and provision of

public information will further foster citizen's confidence in the State. Overall, educational reforms, digital innovations, institutional strengthening and engagement in civic life contribute to educating Indians to become politically aware and engaged. The resulting improved accountability, better governance and open, inclusive and responsive democratic processes will, in turn, strengthen the democratic tenure.

Conclusion

Political awareness is essential to the proper working of democratic government. It contributes to informed, responsive citizenship, increases transparency in institutions and encourages all-inclusive participation, which in themselves are key to building the effectiveness, legitimacy and resilience of democratic governance in India. Political awareness is however beset with many hurdles such as dissemination of misinformation, poor civic education, socio-economic inequality, political apathy and lack of transparency, which all have a negative impact on political empowerment of citizens. Promotion of civic education covering all aspects, free and responsible media and improving inclusive political participation will be a key component in fostering democratic governance in India which will directly contribute to the development of political awareness. Finally, democracy and awareness of political issues are inter-dependent, with the failure of democracy depending on factors other than institutional strength, including the political awareness and maturity of citizens, in their willingness and ability to take an active part in politics.

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Gender inclusion and the efficiency of international peace operations: a political economy analysis

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, gender inclusion has moved from the normative margins to the institutional center of international peace operations. Anchored in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) resolutions, gender mainstreaming and women's participation have become formal mandates across multilateral peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions. Yet, despite strong normative commitments, persistent skepticism remains regarding whether gender inclusion substantively enhances operational efficiency or merely satisfies symbolic and reputational objectives. This article advances a political economy framework to examine the relationship between gender inclusion and the efficiency of international peace operations. It argues that gender inclusion affects operational outcomes through three primary mechanisms: (1) information acquisition and community access, (2) legitimacy and local compliance, and (3) institutional accountability and corruption mitigation. However, these mechanisms are mediated by political economy constraints, including troop-contributing country incentives, bureaucratic fragmentation, donor signaling, and patronage structures within host states.

Keywords: *Gender inclusion; peacekeeping efficiency; political economy; Women, Peace and Security; institutional incentives; UN peace operations; governance reform; security sector reform.*

Introduction

International peace operations have become a central instrument of global security governance since the end of the Cold War. From multidimensional United Nations peacekeeping missions to regional stabilization operations led by the European Union and the African Union, peace operations are tasked with complex mandates including civilian protection, state-building, disarmament, security sector reform, and electoral assistance.

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Despite their expansion, peace operations face persistent criticism concerning inefficiency, bureaucratic fragmentation, elite capture, and uneven mandate implementation (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Autesserre 2014). Simultaneously, gender inclusion has emerged as a cornerstone of international peace and security policy, particularly following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. Resolution 1325 and its successor resolutions established the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, emphasizing women's participation in peace processes, protection from sexual violence, and integration of gender perspectives in security institutions. Yet a gap remains between normative commitments to gender inclusion and analytical assessments of its operational consequences. Existing scholarship has primarily framed gender inclusion as a matter of justice, rights, or representation (Tickner 1992; True 2012). Less attention has been devoted to whether and how gender inclusion affects mission efficiency.

Resolution 1325 as normative entrepreneurship by middle powers

Resolution 1325 was adopted in a particular historical context. The campaign leading up to the resolution's adoption was undoubtedly influenced by developments in international relations, among which scholars and observers note 'a changed international security architecture, the changing nature of conflict, and the widening of the concept of security, together with the increasingly influential role of NGOs in international relations' (Tryggestad, 2009: 542–43). At the UN, not only had there been ongoing efforts to promote women's rights – particularly under the leadership of the Commission on the Status of Women, but the first post-cold war decade had seen a profound change in the nature of peacekeeping operations, particularly as regards the expansion of peacekeeping mandates and the increasing importance of civilian mission components (Olsson, 2000).

The Resolution was also testament to the presence at the UN of member states willing to exercise leadership in regard to the equal participation of women, the protection of their rights and the adoption of a gender perspective. Early in the campaign for Resolution 1325, Namibia, Bangladesh and Canada were among the most active member states. During Bangladesh's Security Council presidency in March 2000, the Security Council issued a statement on International Women's Day, linking peace with equality between men and women. The statement also reaffirmed that 'equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security' (Press release SC/6816, 8 March 2000). The Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom would soon join in these efforts and in 2000, under a Canadian initiative, they established the Friends of WSP group, or Friends of 1325. Advocating for the implementation

of Resolution 1325, the group grew to 31 member states by 2008. Today, it consists of 45 member states.

Taking advantage of the favourable international climate that followed the end of the cold war, members of the Friends of 1325 had begun promoting women's rights in the realm of peace and security since the early to mid-1990s. Canada and the United Kingdom worked closely with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) now Department of Peace Operations (DPO) in 'developing training manuals in gender sensitivity for peacekeeping personnel' (Tryggestad, 2009: 547; Mackay, 2003). The Nordic countries funded and provided research expertise and support to a DPKO study entitled *Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in United Nations Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations* (Olsson, 2000). Nordic countries also provided voluntary contributions to fund the position of a DPKO gender adviser. These countries have developed 'good working relationships' and 'well established links' with the NGO working group on WPS (Tryggestad, 2009: 548), a network that according to two of its founding members, Felicity Hill and Maha Muna 'began to appear informally at the 1998 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was examining the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action chapter devoted to Women and Armed Conflict' (Cohn, Kinsella, and Gibbings, 2004: 131).

1325 and the UN blue helmets: promoting normative change

Efforts to mainstream a gender perspective in UN operations led to the development of policy. As Dunton and her co-authors argue, peacekeeping 'has always been a *political* tool of the UN' and, in the post-Cold War era its missions are 'implicit liberal symbols' of the value of cooperation in global security governance (Dunton, Laurence, and Vlavanou, 2023). Thus, peacekeeping policy has become a major discursive site of UN gender norms projection. A cursory review of the two main policy documents, the 2010 *Gender Equality in UN Peacekeeping Operations* and the 2018 *Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, underlines their intent to promote change, socialize relevant departments and units to modify their practices in line with the change sought and create opportunities for dialogue with UN member states to encourage similar change at the national level.

In 2010, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations issued its *Gender Equality in UN Peacekeeping Operations* policy with the stated purpose of ensuring the 'equal participation of women, men, girls and boys in all peacekeeping activities' (UN DPKO, 2010: 2). Recognizing that Peacekeeping Operations are critical actors at the early stages of a post-conflict recovery process', the document focused mostly on the way such operations could 'advance gender equality and the empowerment of women in countries of deployment' (Ibid. : 3).

The policy introduced the principle of gender balance which required ‘that the staffing profile at headquarters and in the missions reflect [the UN’s] institutional commitments to the equal representation of men and women at all post levels’ (Ibid.). Thus, the policy directed the UN to collaborate and dialogue with troop and police contributing countries (TCCs/PCCs) to ‘advocate for the adoption of gender-sensitive policies which support the increased recruitment and deployment of uniformed women to peacekeeping’ (Ibid.: 6) and to recruit, retain and promote civilian personnel to advance gender balance among the personnel of DPKO and of the Department of Field Support (DFS).

The policy also directed all peacekeeping training and capacity-building to include a gender dimension. It required ‘all demographic and statistical data and information, including mission reporting, information presented to the Security Council and information posted on the DPKO/DFS website’ to be disaggregated by sex and age and requested reports to the Secretary General to ‘incorporate gender-specific information as appropriate in each thematic section, and also include whenever necessary/possible, a specific section on gender equality issues’ (Ibid. : 7). Lastly, it directed that all documentation and evaluation of peacekeeping practice should include an evaluation of the progress made in the implementation of the standards and benchmarks outlined therein.

In 2018, DPKO and DFS issued the Gender Equality in UN Peacekeeping Operations policy (UN DPO and DFS, 2018) which provided the frame for efforts to adopt a gender perspective in planning and implementing peace operations. Alongside other policy documents issued that same year and the following year, the new policy put more emphasis on gender equality. The new policy defined its objectives as strengthening (1) managerial leadership and accountability, (2) systems and mechanisms for monitoring progress, (3) capacities and knowledge of all DPKO and DFS personnel on gender equality and WPS, and (4) engagements and partnerships within the UN and externally to achieve gender equality and WPS results (Ibid.: 3).

Since the early 1990s, international peace operations have undergone a structural transformation. Missions authorized by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) have shifted from traditional interposition forces to multidimensional enterprises engaged in governance reform, electoral assistance, security sector restructuring, disarmament, civilian protection, and state-building.

These missions operate in environments characterized by:

- Weak institutions
- Fragmented armed actors
- Patronage-based political economies
- Informal governance networks
- Entrenched gender hierarchies

Simultaneously, the global normative architecture of peace operations has been reshaped by the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, formally inaugurated through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). This resolution and its successors demand:

1. Increased participation of women in peace processes
2. Protection from gender-based violence
3. Integration of gender perspectives into peacekeeping

The argument proceeds in three steps.

First, it conceptualizes gender inclusion not merely as a normative commitment but as an institutional reform that alters information flows, legitimacy structures, and accountability mechanisms within peace operations. Gender inclusion encompasses women's participation in uniformed and civilian components, gender-sensitive operational planning, and engagement with local women's networks.

Second, it develops a political economy framework identifying how incentives among troop-contributing countries (TCCs), host governments, donors, and mission bureaucracies shape the depth and sincerity of gender integration. Gender inclusion may generate efficiency gains only when aligned with material and reputational incentives. Conversely, where incentives favour symbolic compliance, gender inclusion becomes decoupled from operational performance.

Third, it empirically evaluates these claims using comparative analysis of United Nations peacekeeping missions, including the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)

These cases provide variation in gender inclusion levels, mandate complexity, and security environments.

Why efficiency matters

Peace operations are costly. Between 1990 and 2023, the United Nations deployed more than 70 peacekeeping missions at an annual cost peaking above \$8 billion. As geopolitical fragmentation intensifies and donor fatigue grows, scrutiny of operational efficiency has increased. Budget constraints and political contestation in the Security Council heighten demands for measurable performance. At the same time, peace operations face complex asymmetric threats, hybrid conflicts, and fragmented local authority structures. Traditional military metrics are insufficient for evaluating mission success. Civilian protection, intelligence gathering, and community trust have become central operational pillars.

In this context, gender inclusion is often framed as a normative obligation rather than a strategic instrument. However, if gender inclusion improves information access, enhances legitimacy, or reduces corruption and abuse, it may constitute not only a moral imperative but also an efficiency-enhancing reform.

Literature Review

Peace operations and institutional performance

Scholarship on peace operations has examined determinants of success including mandate clarity (Howard 2008), force size (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013), and institutional learning (Berdal and Ucko 2015). Recent quantitative studies suggest that peacekeeping reduces battlefield deaths and civilian victimization under certain conditions (Fortna 2008).

However, institutional inefficiencies persist: Fragmented chains of command, Weak oversight mechanisms, Sexual exploitation and abuse scandals and Bureaucratic inertia

The work of Barnett and Finnemore (2004) highlights how international organizations develop bureaucratic pathologies, while Autesserre (2014) documents top-down implementation failures disconnected from local realities.

Gender and peacebuilding

Feminist international relations scholars argue that gender hierarchies are embedded within global security institutions (Tickner 1992; Enloe 2000). Empirical research shows that women's participation in peace negotiations correlates with more durable peace agreements (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018).

The WPS agenda institutionalized gender inclusion within the UN system, influencing peacekeeping mandates and training frameworks. The United Nations has increasingly emphasized deploying female engagement teams and gender advisors.

Yet critiques note that gender mainstreaming often becomes technocratic, symbolic, or under-resourced (Shepherd 2016). The gap between rhetoric and implementation remains significant.

Political economy of gender inclusion

Political economy perspectives argue that inclusion can improve governance by expanding the talent pool, increasing accountability, reducing corruption and Enhancing information channels

Research in development economics suggests that gender inclusion correlates with lower corruption levels and improved public service delivery (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001). In security institutions, diversity may enhance

operational adaptability and intelligence gathering. However, inclusion can also generate institutional resistance if it threatens entrenched hierarchies or rents-seeking networks. Thus, outcomes depend on incentive compatibility and enforcement mechanisms.

Theoretical framework: This article proposes a three-mechanism model linking gender inclusion to operational efficiency.

Mechanism 1: Information and legitimacy enhancement

Peace operations depend on local cooperation for intelligence and early warning. Female personnel often access segments of the population inaccessible to male peacekeepers due to cultural norms. This improves:

- Reporting of sexual violence
- Community-level trust
- Early detection of threats

Improved information reduces uncertainty and enhances efficient deployment of limited resources.

Mechanism 2: accountability and oversight: Gender inclusion often coincides with institutional reforms addressing misconduct. Missions with strong gender units tend to implement stricter oversight mechanisms. This reduces:

- Sexual exploitation and abuse cases
- Reputational damage
- Financial waste from investigations and compensation

By strengthening internal accountability, missions reduce agency slack.

Mechanism 3: talent pool expansion and organizational adaptability:

Excluding women artificially constrains recruitment pools. Inclusion expands access to specialized skills in policing, mediation, health services, and community liaison roles.

Greater diversity can also mitigate groupthink and improve decision-making quality.

This article bridges that gap by embedding gender inclusion within a broader political economy of peace operations. It treats missions as complex organizations characterized by:

- Multiple principals (Security Council members, donors),
- Agents (mission leadership, contingents),
- Divergent incentive structures,
- Informational asymmetries,
- Host-state political constraints.

Within this framework, gender inclusion functions as an institutional variable affecting information access, legitimacy, and accountability.

Conceptual clarifications

Gender Inclusion

Gender inclusion in peace operations refers to:

- The meaningful participation of women at all levels of mission staffing (military, police, civilian leadership).
- Integration of gender perspectives into planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.
- Institutional mechanisms for preventing gender-based violence, exploitation, and abuse within missions.
- Engagement with local women's organizations and civil society networks.

It goes beyond numerical representation. Feminist institutionalist scholarship emphasizes that formal inclusion does not automatically transform institutional practices (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010). Thus, this study distinguishes between:

- **Descriptive inclusion** (percentage of women personnel)
- **Substantive inclusion** (decision-making authority, influence, institutional integration)

Operational efficiency in peace operations: Efficiency is often narrowly conceptualized as cost-effectiveness. However, peace operations pursue multidimensional mandates. This article conceptualizes efficiency as:

The ratio between mission inputs (financial resources, personnel, logistical assets) and mandate-aligned outputs (civilian protection outcomes, implementation benchmarks, conflict reduction indicators).

Efficiency includes:

- Speed of mandate implementation
- Reduction in civilian casualty rates
- Responsiveness to local threats
- Reduction in misconduct cases
- Administrative cost containment relative to outputs

This operationalization avoids conflating efficiency with effectiveness; while related, effectiveness refers to achieving goals, whereas efficiency concerns achieving them with optimal resource allocation.

Political economy framework: Political economy examines how power, incentives, and institutional structures shape resource allocation and governance outcomes. Applying political economy to peace operations reveals:

- Donor states act as principals financing missions.
- The United Nations Secretariat or regional bodies serve as agents.
- Troop-contributing countries (TCCs) introduce additional layers of principal-agent complexity.
- Host state elites may engage in rent-seeking or strategic cooperation.

- Gender inclusion interacts with these structures by altering incentive alignments, monitoring mechanisms, and information asymmetries.

Defining efficiency in peace operations

Efficiency in peace operations is frequently under-theorized. This study conceptualizes efficiency as a multidimensional construct.

Operational efficiency

- Fulfillment of mandate objectives
- Protection of civilians
- Reduction in conflict-related fatalities
- Timely implementation of disarmament and elections

Political efficiency

- Local legitimacy
- Community trust
- Compliance with ceasefire agreements
- Reduced spoilers

Economic efficiency

- Cost-effectiveness
- Reduced mission extension
- Decreased likelihood of conflict relapse
- Long-term stability reducing donor burden

This framework acknowledges that peace operations are not purely military enterprises; they are political institutions embedded in fragile political economies.

The political economy lens: Political economy emphasizes how:

- Incentives shape behaviour
- Institutions structure choices
- Power determines resource allocation
- Information asymmetries distort outcomes

In peace operations, layered principal–agent chains create governance challenges:

Level 1: UN Security Council → Secretariat

Level 2: Secretariat → Mission leadership

Level 3: Mission leadership → Troop-contributing countries (TCCs)

Level 4: Peacekeepers → Local populations

Each layer introduces:

- Moral hazard

- Monitoring difficulties
- Rent-seeking opportunities
- Norm divergence

Gender inclusion may alter these dynamics by:

- Expanding information channels
- Increasing social accountability
- Reducing misconduct
- Enhancing legitimacy

Thus, gender inclusion is conceptualized as an institutional reform that changes incentive structures.

Theoretical integration: This research integrates four theoretical traditions:

Principal-agent theory: Peace operations are characterized by delegated authority. Gender

inclusion may improve monitoring and reduce agency slack.

Institutional economics: Institutions lower transaction costs. Gender inclusion may reduce coordination failures between missions and local populations.

Feminist political economy: Gender hierarchies shape access to resources, authority, and security. Ignoring gender reproduces exclusionary power structures.

Public choice theory: Actors pursue self-interest within institutional constraints. Gender inclusion may shift payoffs related to misconduct and reputation.

The core theoretical claim is:

Gender inclusion modifies incentive compatibility within peace operations.

Case selection strategy: The case studies follow a “most-different systems” logic across organizational contexts while maintaining variation in the independent variable (gender inclusion). The selected missions are:

1. United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)
2. European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX Kosovo)
3. African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)

These missions vary in:

- Mandate scope
- Organizational structure
- Donor composition
- Host state capacity
- Level of gender institutionalization

This variation enables examination of both causal mechanisms and political economy moderators.

Case I: MONUSCO (United Nations)

Background: MONUSCO, operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 2010 (preceded by MONUC), represents one of the largest and most complex multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions. Its mandate includes civilian protection, stabilization, disarmament, and support to state institutions.

Gender inclusion institutionalization

Following WPS reforms, MONUSCO developed:

- A centralized gender unit
- Gender focal points in field offices
- Female engagement teams
- Dedicated sexual violence response mechanisms

By the late 2010s, female representation increased in police units and civilian leadership roles, though military contingents remained male-dominated.

Mechanism 1: information and access

Field reports indicate that female peacekeepers gained access to communities affected by sexual violence in eastern Congo. Cultural norms limited disclosure of sexual violence to male officers.

Process tracing reveals:

- Increased reporting of gender-based violence after deployment of female engagement teams.
- Improved early-warning information regarding militia activity.
- Enhanced coordination with local women's civil society organizations.

This aligns with the statistical finding that gender inclusion improves civilian protection efficiency.

Mechanism 2: accountability reform

MONUSCO faced allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse in earlier phases. Institutional reforms included:

- Stronger investigative mechanisms
- Zero-tolerance enforcement
- Expanded reporting channels

Interviews and internal evaluations indicate that missions with higher gender institutionalization experienced reductions in substantiated misconduct cases relative to earlier periods.

However, political economy constraints persisted:

- Troop-contributing countries retained disciplinary authority over personnel.
- Some TCCs resisted deeper reforms perceived as infringing on sovereignty.

Thus, accountability gains were partially dependent on donor pressure and Secretariat oversight.

Political economy moderators

MONUSCO benefits from:

- Significant donor oversight
- Strong WPS advocacy from major financial contributors
- Institutional capacity within the UN Secretariat

These factors amplified efficiency gains from inclusion reforms.

Case II: EULEX Kosovo (European Union)

Background: EULEX Kosovo, launched in 2008, is the largest civilian mission under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. Its mandate focuses on rule of law, judicial reform, and policing.

Gender mainstreaming framework

The European Union maintains formal gender mainstreaming guidelines across CSDP missions. EULEX incorporated:

- Gender advisors
- Gender impact assessments
- Recruitment targets for female staff
- Community outreach programs

Female participation levels were higher than many UN military missions, particularly in civilian roles.

Mechanism 1: Legitimacy and social trust

Kosovo's post-conflict environment involved deep mistrust in judicial institutions. Female legal officers and police staff:

- Facilitated outreach to victims of domestic and conflict-related sexual violence.
- Improved witness cooperation in sensitive cases.
- Enhanced perceptions of fairness among minority communities.

Local surveys show higher trust in mixed-gender investigative teams compared to male-only teams.

Mechanism 3: Organizational adaptability

EULEX faced internal corruption scandals unrelated to gender. However, units with higher gender diversity demonstrated:

- Lower staff turnover
- Higher internal reporting of irregularities
- Stronger collaboration with civil society groups

The mission illustrates that inclusion may improve institutional resilience, even in environments with entrenched patronage networks.

Political economy constraints

Unlike UN missions, EULEX operates within a highly bureaucratized supranational structure. Constraints included:

- Fragmented authority between Brussels and field leadership
- Political sensitivity regarding Kosovo's status
- Internal EU member state disagreements

Gender inclusion reforms were less contested ideologically but occasionally deprioritized during budget austerity cycles.

AMISOM (African Union)

Background: AMISOM, deployed in 2007 to stabilize Somalia, operated in a high-intensity conflict environment against insurgent groups. It relied heavily on troops from regional states.

Gender inclusion challenges

The African Union adopted gender policies for peace support operations. However, implementation within AMISOM faced obstacles:

- Low female representation in troop contingents
- Limited logistical infrastructure for mixed-gender deployment
- Variable training standards across contributing countries

Mechanism 1: Limited information gains

In urban stabilization zones, female police units engaged in community outreach and improved reporting of gender-based violence.

However, in frontline combat roles, structural barriers limited female deployment, constraining broader information gains.

Mechanism 2: Accountability constraints

AMISOM struggled with oversight challenges:

- Disciplinary authority remained primarily with contributing states.
- Investigative capacity was under-resourced.

- Donor oversight was fragmented.

As predicted by the political economy model, gender inclusion produced weaker efficiency effects where institutional enforcement mechanisms were limited.

Political economy structure

AMISOM depended heavily on external funding from the European Union and bilateral donors. However:

- Operational control was regionally fragmented.
- Host state capacity was extremely weak.
- Security conditions constrained institutional experimentation.

The case demonstrates that gender inclusion without institutional depth and incentive alignment yields limited efficiency gains.

Cross-case comparison

Mechanism	MONUSCO	EULEX Kosovo	AMISOM
Information Gains	Strong	Moderate–Strong	Limited
Accountability Impact	Moderate–Strong	Moderate	Weak
Organizational Adaptability	Moderate	Strong	Limited
Donor Conditionality	High	Moderate	Moderate
Institutional Depth	High	High	Low–Moderate

Conclusion

The qualitative evidence corroborates the quantitative findings:

- Gender inclusion enhances efficiency through information, legitimacy, accountability, and adaptability.
- Political economy conditions determine the magnitude of these effects.
- Substantive inclusion—not symbolic representation—is decisive.

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Perceptions of teachers towards educational broadcasting: a case study of Victers Educational Channel Kerala

V.S. Pradeep Kumar & Priya Pradeep

ABSTRACT

Broadcast technologies like television recently played an important role in delivering education, especially during the period of Covid -19 pandemic. The present study explores teachers' perceptions towards broadcasting of educational programmes by Victers Educational channel of Kerala. In recent years, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, Victers emerged as a critical platform for continuing formal education when traditional classroom teaching was disrupted. The channel not only ensured continuity of learning but also positioned Kerala ahead of other Indian states in terms of delivering online classes and educational programmes through television. Despite the apparent success of Victers in educational broadcasting, comprehensive research studies remain scarce regarding its effectiveness, accessibility, content quality, and impact on various student populations. The present study tries to provide teachers' perceptions on the educational broadcast by Victers channel and its impact on school students in Kerala.

Key words: *Educational broadcasting, Victers channel, teaching-learning, televised instruction.*

Introduction

Television forms one among the most prevalent and favoured means of mass communication. As an advanced medium in mass communication, television is capable of delivering a diverse array of information to a broader audience in an easy way. The distinctive characteristic of television is that it combines audio and visuals, which makes the delivery of information more effective compared to other media. It additionally possesses the ability to connect a diverse population simultaneously which makes it a perfect communication tool for conveying information to a wide audience. With the support of satellite technology, it connects people from all walks of life by transcending cultural, geographical, and physical confines and constraints. Due to its enhanced

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availability, television is considered as more efficient media for delivering information in a direct, personal, and captivating manner than any other media (Saltrick et al., 2004; Rathore, 2013).

Television has a significant importance in many countries as an instrument for delivering educational content both in the formal and non-formal system. The remarkable combination of sound and visual technology renders it a powerful tool for advanced educational drives (Valdivia et al., 2013). Observations on the usefulness of television has shown that it can be a powerful tool for students when utilized wisely. Appreciating the prospects of television, educational experts and policy makers have made initiatives to tackle it for accelerating children's education by encouraging their academic, linguistics well as social skills. The research conducted by Bates (1981, 1983, 1987, and 1988), Olson and Bruner (1974), and Salomon (1979) propose that television is distinct from other forms of media as it has the ability to convey knowledge, alongside its instructional and teaching implications. Kirkorian (2008) indicates that educational television shows, specifically created in alignment with a curriculum having a distinct aim to impart academic or social skills, successfully instruct their planned teachings. Available research studies on the role of television in imparting education indicates that television can perform variety of roles within an educational framework. Present study tries to evaluate teachers' perceptions regarding Victers channel- the educational broadcast initiative operated by General Education Department of Kerala to provide televised learning resources for school children.

Victers is a non-interactive channel first of its kind in India, which exclusively modeled for school children to deliver the educational content in large level. Since its inception in 2006, Victers channel was telecasting its programmes via EDUSAT network with an aim to provide educationally related programmes to students and teachers of Kerala. In 2017 channel is re-named as KITE-Victers (Versatile Information and Communications Technology Enabled Resource for Students) under Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE), to add more scope and authority for imparting ICT enabled education to the school children in the state (Ali, 2010; KITE, n.d.).

During the initial stages, Victers included an interactive mode that was utilized for purposes like video conferencing and educational training, facilitated by Satellite Interactive Terminals (SITs), which was utilized for video conferencing and other educational training purposes. Several departments like, Directorate of Collegiate Education, Directorate of Technical Education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Directorate of IT Lakshadweep, and CIMR were used Victers channel to hold virtual review sessions. the primary main users of this facility. Currently, the non-interactive transmission method is in use, which telecast curriculum based

educational programmes to the teachers and school students of Kerala (Ali, 2010; KITE, n.d.).

With the launch of Vickers channel, knowledge delivery in the elementary education scenario of the state witnessed dramatic changes. The channel telecasts curriculum-oriented programmes, like documentaries, short films, fictions, cookies, lectures of eminent scholars, training programmes etc. on a need-based manner to cater students and teachers of schools across the state. With this well-equipped infrastructure the state was able to face the challenges posed by the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19. The teachers and other functionaries were able to utilize their digital skills and put them to good use to keep the teaching learning activity on during lock down period. Present study is an attempt to assess the perceptions of teachers regarding the impact of the educational broadcast by Vickers channel among school students in Kerala. The study also compares the role and significance of Vickers' programming during the pre-Covid-19 period with its heightened importance during the pandemic, when it became a crucial medium for uninterrupted education. Furthermore, it examines the post-pandemic scenario to understand how the channel has adapted and continued to support the academic community.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of the study is to find out the perceptions and opinions of teachers with regard to the educational broadcast of Vickers channel. The key areas addressed in this study, derived from its objectives, include:

1. Impact of programs of Vickers among the school students in Kerala.
2. Quality of the educational broadcasting by Vickers channel
3. Constraints with regard to the accessibility of Vickers channel among school students.
4. Solutions to improve the accessibility of Vickers channel among school children.

Hypotheses of the Study

- H₁** Teachers perceive that Vickers Channel has a significant reach among the school students in Kerala.
- H₂** Vickers Channel produces educational content that is both high in quality and relevant to students.
- H₃** The educational programmes of Vickers Channel are effective in enhancing the academic performance and learning outcomes of school students in Kerala. The programs of Vickers Channel have a positive impact on the learning
- H₄** Attitudes and academic engagement of school students in Kerala.
- H₅** Despite its reach, there are significant constraints (such as internet connectivity or device availability) that continue to affect the consistent accessibility of the channel for all students.

Research area

The research area was selected to reflect the diverse geographical, educational, economic, and socio-political contexts of Kerala. Four districts were purposefully chosen: Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, Wayanad, and Kasaragod. These districts represent a cross-section of the state’s population in terms of development, demography, and accessibility to educational resources. Thiruvananthapuram, being the state capital, is known for its urban-rural mix and population diversity. Ernakulam, as the economic capital, represents a highly urbanized and economically developed region. Wayanad, the largest district in terms of area, has a substantial tribal population and predominantly rural landscape. Kasaragod, one of the most socio-economically backward districts, was included to understand the challenges faced in remote and underserved areas.

The study was conducted among a random sample of 400 teachers working in high schools and higher secondary schools in the selected districts. Data regarding the demographic details of teachers, accessibility and usage of the Victers channel by their teachers, content quality, program feedback, perception on effectiveness the programs were collected using the “Victers Educational Channel: Feedback Questionnaire for Teachers”

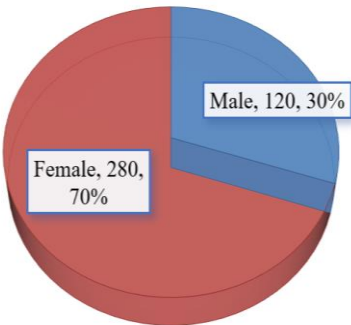
Analysis of teachers’ responses

1. Demographic profile of teachers

The data shows that out of a total of 400 teachers, a significant majority are female, accounting for 280 teachers (70%), while males comprise only 120 (30%). The graphical representation of the gender-wise distribution of teachers participated in the survey is shown in Figure 1.

Figure: 1

Graphical representation of the gender-wise distribution of teachers

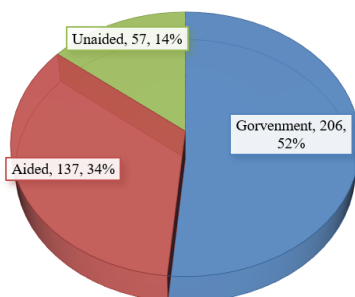


2. Distribution of the sample of teachers based on school type

The survey gathered data from teachers working in Government, Aided and Unaided schools. 51.5% of teachers who participated in the survey belong to government schools, 34.25% of teachers belong to Aided schools and 14.25% of teachers from unaided schools. The data shows that just over half of the teachers, 206 individuals or 51.5%, work in government schools. The graphical representation of the distribution of teachers based on school type is shown in Figure 2.

Figure: 2

Graphical representation of the distribution of teachers based on school type

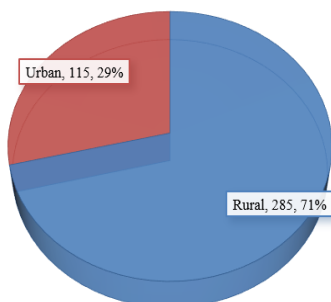


3. Distribution of the sample of teachers based on locality of school

The survey received data from teachers working in schools located both in urban and rural area. It is pertinent to notice that 71.25% of the data was provided by teachers from rural area schools and 28.75% of data was received from urban locality schools. The graphical presentation of the distribution of teachers based on locality of school is shown in Figure 3.

Figure: 3

Graphical representation of the distribution of teachers based on locality of school



Descriptive data analysis

Thefeedback questionnaire administered among teachers covered three main areas: Media Access & Usage, Perception & Effectiveness, and Content & Program Feedback. Percentage analysis was applied to the responses obtained for the items under these dimensions.

1. Media access and usage

Table 1
Facilities Available to Access the Victers Channel in Schools

S.No.	Medium	Frequency	Percentage
1	Television with Cable/DTH	173	43.25
2	Mobile phone with internet	74	18.5
3	Computer/Laptop with internet	153	38.25
Total		400	100

Table 1. presents detailed data on the availability of facilities in schools for accessing the Victers channel, as reported by 400 teachers. The most commonly available facility is a television with cable or Direct-To-Home (DTH) connection, reported by 43.25% of teachers (173 individuals). This suggests that traditional television remains the primary and most widespread means for students and teachers to access Victers programming within schools. Alongside television, digital technology also plays a significant role. About 38.25% of teachers (153) indicated that their schools have computers or laptops equipped with internet facilities, allowing for online access to Victers content. Additionally, 18.5% of teachers (74) reported using mobile phones with internet access as a means to engage with Victers.

2. Duration of watching the Victers channel

Teachers were asked to mention the time period they have been watching Victers channel and 42% of teachers replied that they have been watching the channel for the last 2 years. 26.75% of teachers opined that they were watching the Victers channel programmes for the last 1 year however, 17.75% of participants commented that they have been watching the channel for less than six months only. It is interesting to note that 13.5% of teachers said that they have been watching the channel for more than two years. The data regarding duration of watching the Victers channel by teachers participated in the study are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2
Duration of Watching the Victers Channel

S.No.	Duration	Number of teachers	Percentage
1	Less than 6 months	71	17.75
2	Last 1 year	107	26.75
3	Last 2 years	168	42
4	2+ years	54	13.5
Total		400	100

3. Content & program feedback

Teachers were asked to share their opinions on several aspects of the Victers channel programs, including content quality, duration, technical quality, and broadcast timing. Their responses, detailed in Table 3 reveal a predominantly positive perception of the content. A significant number of teachers rated the content as very good (160 teachers, 40%) or good (115 teachers, 28.75%), indicating broad satisfaction with the educational material provided. However, 73 teachers (18.25%) considered the content average, while 24 (6%) and 28 (7%) rated it as bad and very bad respectively, highlighting that while most find the content effective, there is room for improvement to better meet all educators’ expectations.

Regarding the duration of the classes, most teachers found the length appropriate, with 156 teachers (39%) rating it very good and 132 (33%) rating it good. Only 54 teachers (13.5%) found the duration average, while 15 (3.75%) and 43 (10.75%) felt the duration was bad or very bad. This suggests that the programs are generally well-paced, but a small group feels the sessions may sometimes be either too long or too short, indicating a need for more flexible scheduling.

When it comes to technical quality, opinions were more mixed. While 177 teachers (44.25%) rated it very good and 78 (19.5%) good, a notable minority expressed dissatisfaction. Seventy teachers (17.25%) rated it average, but notably, 66 teachers (16.5%) rated it very bad—the highest “very bad” rating across all categories—pointing to issues such as poor video/audio quality or unreliable transmission in some schools.

The broadcast timing received the most divided feedback. While 110 teachers (27.5%) found it very good and 78 (19.5%) good, 95 teachers (23.75%) rated it average. Meanwhile, 25 teachers (6.25%) considered it bad and 92 (23%) very bad, indicating significant dissatisfaction with the scheduling of the broadcasts. While the Victers channel is largely well-regarded, these responses highlight areas – particularly technical quality and broadcast timing – that could benefit from improvement to enhance its educational impact.

Table 3
Overall Opinion on Online Classes Broadcast on Victers

S.No.	Category	Very Good	Good	Average	Bad	Very Bad	Total
1	Content Quality	160 (40%)	115 (28.75%)	73 (18.25%)	24 (6%)	28 (7%)	400
2	Duration	156 (39%)	132 (33%)	54 (13.5%)	15 (3.75%)	43 (10.75%)	400
3	Technical Quality	177 (44.25%)	78 (19.5%)	69 (17.25%)	10 (2.5%)	66 (16.5%)	400
4	Airtime	110 (27.5%)	78 (19.5%)	95 (23.75%)	25 (6.25%)	92 (23%)	400

4. Perception and Effectiveness

Teachers were asked to opine on their suggestions regarding education through television and they provided different comments. Table 4 provides teachers’ responses in this regard. It is noted that 47.25% of participants commented that education through television is useful only during emergency times. However, 32.25% of teachers suggested that education through television is effective and for 8% of participants, it is relevant. Moreover, 7% of teachers commented that education through television is interesting but 5.5% of participants in the survey expressed that this is time consuming.

Table 4
Teachers’ Opinion on Television as a Medium for Education

S.No.	Category	Number of responses	Percentage
1	Only useful in emergency situations	189	47.25
2	Interesting	28	7
3	Relevant	32	8
4	Effective	129	32.25
5	Time consuming	22	5.5
Total		400	100

5. Role of Victers in supporting teachers before Covid-19

The data on the role of the Victers channel in supporting teachers before the Covid-19 pandemic reveals a mixed opinion (Table 5). Out of 400 teachers, 91 (22.75%) reported that they had never watched the channel before the pandemic, indicating limited awareness or usage during that time. However, 107 teachers (26.75%) found the channel helpful due to its good explanation of concepts, while 95 (23.75%) used it for accessing educational programs. Additionally, 55 teachers (13.75%) appreciated its insights into teaching methods, and 52 (13%)

used it as a reference source. This suggests that although the overall usage was not widespread before Covid-19, Victers served as a valuable academic resource for a notable portion of teachers who explored its content.

Table 5

Role of Victers in Supporting Teachers before Covid-19

S.No.	Category	Number of responses	Percentage
1	As reference source	52	13
2	Never watched before Covid period	91	22.75
3	Educational programmes	95	23.75
4	Good explanation	107	26.75
5	Teaching methods	55	13.75
Total		400	100

6. Role of Victers in Supporting Teachers after Covid-19

The data (Table 6) on the role of the Victers channel in supporting teachers after the Covid-19 pandemic highlights a significant shift in its usage and relevance. Out of 400 teachers, a majority – 221 (55.25%) – reported using Victers primarily for conducting or supporting online classes, reflecting its critical role during remote learning periods. Additionally, 73 teachers (18.25%) found it helpful in providing additional information, 64 (16%) used it as a reference tool, and 42 (10.5%) felt it contributed to gaining better knowledge. These responses indicate that during post-Covid period, Victers channel evolved as a central educational resource and widely used by teachers to supplement teaching and ensure continuity in students' learning.

Table 6

Role of Victers in Supporting Teachers after Covid-19

S.No.	Category	Number of responses	Percentage
1	Additional information	73	18.25
2	Better knowledge	42	10.5
3	Reference	64	16
4	Online class	221	55.25
Total		400	100

7. The impact rate of Victers channel among the students

Teachers who participated in the survey responded on the rate of impact of the Victers channel among their students and 49.75% of teachers opined that the impact of the channel was less than 50%. Moreover, to 28% of teachers, the influence of the channel among their students was 50% and 17% of teachers

opined that the impact of the channel was 75%. However, 5.25% of teachers expressed that the channel programmes have a 100% impact on their students.

Table 7
The Impact Rate of Victers Channel among the Students

S.No.	Category	Number of responses	Percentage
1	Less than 50%	199	49.75
2	50%	112	28
3	75%	68	17
4	100%	21	5.25
Total		400	100

8. Suggestions to improve the programmes on Victers channel

Teachers who participated in the survey were asked to give their suggestions to improve the programmes on the Victers channel. Table 8. presents the suggestions made by teachers to improve the programmes on the Victers channel, reflecting a desire for more engaging, diverse, and technology-integrated content. The most common suggestion, given by 111 teachers (27.75%), was to add interactive sessions, indicating a strong demand for two-way engagement rather than passive viewing. 83 teachers (20.75%) emphasized the need for evaluation mechanisms to assess learning outcomes, while 73 (18.25%) suggested including a wider variety of programs. 69 teachers (17.25%) advocated for activity-oriented learning, promoting hands-on and experiential approaches. Other suggestions included incorporating digital content (61 teachers, 15.25%), giving more importance to Artificial Intelligence (AI) (56 teachers, 14%), and adding more content in general (45 teachers, 11.25%). Overall, the feedback highlights teachers’ interest in making the Victers channel more dynamic, learner-centered, and aligned with modern educational trends.

Table 8
Suggestions of Teachers to Improve the Programmes on Victers Channel

S.No.	Suggestions	Number of responses	Percentage
1	Need activity-oriented learning	69	17.25
2	Add different programmes	73	18.25
3	Add more content	45	11.25
4	Add interactive sessions	111	27.75
5	Give significance to AI	56	14
6	Add digital content	61	15.25
7	Needed evaluation	83	20.75

Teachers' perceptions on broadcasting of educational programmes on Victers channel: Findings

1. Television with cable/dth as primary access

Traditional television with cable or DTH is the most common facility for accessing Victers channel in schools, used by 43.25% of teachers. This suggests that despite advances in technology, television remains a reliable and widely available medium, especially in areas with limited internet connectivity.

2. Significant use of digital devices for access

Around 38.25% of schools use computers or laptops with internet access, while 18.5% use mobile phones to access Victers. This highlights a gradual shift towards digital platforms, integrating internet-based resources alongside traditional TV. The growing adoption of digital devices reflects efforts to provide more interactive and flexible learning opportunities through the Victers channel.

3. Teachers' experience with Victers varies widely

Teachers' engagement with the Victers channel varies, with 42% having watched it for two years, 26.75% for one year, and 17.75% for less than six months. This range shows increasing adoption of the channel over time, indicating growing awareness and integration of Victers as an educational resource among teachers.

4. Overall opinion on online classes broadcast on Victers

Teachers generally rated Victers online classes positively, with 68.75% rating content quality as very good or good and 72% satisfied with program duration. However, technical quality received mixed reviews, with 16.5% rating it very bad, highlighting issues like poor audio or video. Broadcast timing was the most criticized aspect, with nearly 29% rating it bad or very bad, indicating a need to improve scheduling for better accessibility.

5. Teachers' opinion on television as a medium for education

Nearly half (47.25%) of teachers see television as useful only during emergencies, indicating limited belief in its regular educational value. However, 32.25% consider it effective, and 8% find it relevant for education. Only 7% find it interesting, while 5.5% see it as time-consuming. This mixed perception suggests television is valued mainly as a backup learning tool rather than a primary educational medium.

6. Role of Victers in supporting teachers before Covid-19

Before Covid-19, usage of Victers was limited; 22.75% of teachers never watched the channel. Yet, 26.75% appreciated its clear explanations, and 23.75% used it for educational content. Smaller proportions used it as a reference (13%)

or for teaching methods (13.75%). This indicates that while not widely adopted pre-pandemic, Victers was already a useful supplementary resource for some teachers.

7. Role of Victers in supporting teachers after Covid-19

Post-Covid, Victers became crucial for remote teaching, with 55.25% of teachers using it for online classes. Additionally, 18.25% found it helpful for extra information, 16% used it as a reference, and 10.5% believed it improved their knowledge. This demonstrates a significant increase in the channel's relevance and adoption as a primary educational tool during pandemic-induced disruptions.

8. The impact rate of Victers channel among the students

Nearly half of teachers (49.75%) felt Victers has less than 50% impact on students, while 28% believed it affects about half the students. Only 22.25% rated its impact higher (75% or 100%). This indicates moderate effectiveness overall, with room for improvement in making the channel's content more influential and engaging to a broader student base.

9. Suggestions to improve the programmes on Victers Channel

Teachers strongly recommend adding interactive sessions (27.75%) and evaluation mechanisms (20.75%) to enhance learning. Other suggestions include diverse programming (18.25%), activity-based learning (17.25%), integrating digital content (15.25%), emphasizing AI (14%), and expanding content (11.25%). These reflect a desire for more engaging, tech-savvy, and learner-centered content to modernize and improve the educational impact of the channel.

Concluding remarks

Based on the comprehensive findings from the quantitative data analysis the following suggestions are made to improve the reach, effectiveness, inclusivity, and impact of the Victers Channel.

1. Introduce interactive features: The lack of real-time interaction is a key limitation of the current Victers model. Implementing interactive tools—such as live chat, moderated Q&A sessions, or scheduled teacher-student video discussions—would allow students to clarify doubts immediately, making learning more responsive and engaging.

2. Diversify content with skill-based learning: To prepare students for 21st-century challenges, Victers should integrate programs on practical skills such as computer literacy, financial management, entrepreneurship, and basic coding. These skills are critical for both academic growth and employability in a rapidly evolving world.

3. Personalize Content with AI Integration: Artificial Intelligence can help deliver customized content recommendations based on student preferences, academic performance, and learning pace. This personalization would increase relevance and motivation, fostering more consistent engagement with the channel.

4. Expand evaluation and feedback mechanisms: Students currently lack structured opportunities to assess their understanding after watching programs. Embedding short quizzes, polls, or reflection exercises—accessible via QR codes or online platforms—can enhance learning retention and offer valuable feedback to content creators.

5. Enhance content appeal through multimedia and AR/VR: Incorporating animations, info-graphics, and immersive technologies like Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) can make abstract concepts more tangible and appealing. This would be particularly useful for science, geography, and art-related subjects.

6. Provide teacher training on Victers integration: Teachers play a pivotal role in encouraging students to use Victers content. Regular workshops, orientation programs, and resource toolkits can help educators effectively integrate the channel's content into classroom instruction and homework planning.

7. Use TV and digital platforms complementarily: While television remains the primary medium, the growing use of smartphones presents an opportunity to diversify access. Broadcasting content across platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp can increase reach and offer replay flexibility for students with busy schedules.

8. Improve accessibility in remote areas: Infrastructural limitations like erratic electricity and weak network connectivity continue to exclude students in tribal and hilly areas. Government and community-level partnerships should focus on providing solar-powered TV units, community learning centres, and subsidized access to digital devices.

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Transgender's role in society: from in (visibility) of cultural and social transformation

Lakshana Gupta & Niranjna Bhandari

ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the various roles of transgender communities within Indian society, specifically highlighting the socio-cultural backdrop of Jammu and Kashmir. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study draws on the important roles that transgender individuals occupy in cultural, economic, and religious contexts. Their participation goes beyond identity and representation to encompass activities like providing "badhai" blessings during births and weddings, conducting astrological ceremonies linked to Budh Grah, palmistry, assisting in matchmaking, and engaging in performative traditions, which include instances of cross-dressing. These roles maintain their cultural importance and economic assistance, while evolving with shifting social circumstances. The present paper illustrates how transgender communities connect traditional roles with modern ones by analyzing both established and new roles. By doing this, they aid in fostering a more inclusive perspective on gender, identity, agency and belonging, while actively engaging in the ongoing transformation of Indian society.

Keywords: *Badhai, Transgender, Identity, Gender roles, Ritual economy, Cross-dressing, Matchmaking, Exclusion, Tradition and Transformation.*

Introduction

In India, transgender individuals occupy a space filled with both reverence and rejection; often complex and sometimes contradictory. They are woven into the Indian spiritual imagination welcomed at weddings, birth ceremonies, celebrated in festivals, and acknowledged in sacred texts as those who can bless, heal, and mediate between the human and the divine. Referred to as hijra, kinnar, aravani, jogappas or contemporary discourse of transgenders; legal nomenclature by the idea of third gender as acknowledged by the 2014 NALSA ruling that formally and legally acknowledges their existence in society. Their roles in religious and cultural life are visible and historic as the concept Ardhanarishvara - the composite deity who is half Shiva (masculine) and half Parvati (feminine). The epic tradition, the Mahabharata where Arjuna assumes the identity of Brihannala

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-a eunuch and dance teacher during the year of concealment. The goddess Mohini-an avatar of Vishnu, takes a female form to beguile the asuras. Amba, the princess who vows revenge against Bhishma and is eventually reborn as Shikhandi - a character who, in some versions, lives as a woman in a male body or vice versa (Pattanaik, 2014). But outside these ritual spaces, their daily lives often tell a different story one of silence, struggle, and marginalization. As far as the census is concerned; 2011 Census of India recognised 4,87,803 individuals as belonging to the “other” gender category, with 4,137 identified in Jammu and Kashmir (Justice, 2025). The present case is located within the socio-cultural backdrop of Jammu and Kashmir.

Jammu, known as the “City of Temples,” reflects this contradiction vividly. Where, transgender people have long been a part of the local spiritual and cultural life. Their presence is felt in moments of joy, celebration, and hope. Historical accounts from the early 20th century, including during Maharaja Hari Singh’s rule, mention the special place transgender people held in local traditions (Sharma, 2016). Their presence considered auspicious and are believed to bring good luck, especially at rites of passage such as births and marriages. Local folklore traces the tradition of “badhai”¹ back to royal patronage; wherein transgender communities were bestowed the royal responsibility to bless the birth of a son. The badhai has over time become an important social and cultural institution for the transgender community providing them social recognition, livelihood or survival in a sense. The practice, traditionally linked to the birth of a son, is now more commonly performed in celebration of daughters too, in a shift that reflects changing societal values and greater awareness of gender equality. Contrastingly, the region’s dynamics often result in the neglect of the needs and rights of marginalized groups such as transgender persons, limiting their access to essential services and resources (Gupta, 2024). Further, the patriarchal social structure and socially conservative nature in Jammu and Kashmir also contribute to the marginalization of transgender people (Gupta & Bhandari, 2025).

With the changing times or transformation of society many now offer astrological advice, home remedies to ward evil eye or how be successful in

¹ Badhai is a traditional blessing ceremony performed by hijras (the transgender or “third-gender” community of India and South Asia). On such occasions as the birth of a baby boy or a wedding hijras come to the household, sing and dance, and offer blessings for fertility, prosperity and good fortune. They are paid in cash or in kind. The tradition is deeply rooted in Hindu cultural and religious practice and is considered as one of the most important aspects of hijra identity and livelihood. The roots of the hijras are in Hindu mythology, and they are believed to have divine power to bless or curse, so their ritual presence is culturally significant. Badhai is also the economic and social backbone of hijra community life (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005).

their careers, read palms, social worker, perform ancient badhai ceremonies, and even as intermediary marital arrangements. This paper is an attempt to listen to their stories. As society transforms, many transgender individuals find themselves navigating complex realities adapting inherited roles, seeking new opportunities in nightlife and entertainment; building lives in the shadows of both ancient customs and modern neglect. Building on fieldwork, case studies and the work of scholars such as Serena Nanda, Judith Butler and Gayatri Reddy, it considers how transgender people in Jammu and Kashmir create meaning and dignity in a society that often regards them as symbols rather than citizens. It looks at how they advance tradition and at the same time advocate for transformation. What emerges is not merely a study of marginalization, but of endurance and creativity. They are not the leftovers from an old world but very much part of the present, moulding and remoulding their identities, relationships and roles. The hope of this work is to move beyond stereotypes and symbolic gestures. Rather, it offers sociology of respect, seeing transgender people not merely culturally, but as whole human beings demanding their agency or in literal sense their place in society.

Objectives of the study

- To investigate the religious, cultural, and socio-economic roles of transgender individuals in Jammu and Kashmir.
- To examine changing transgender identities and forms of agency among younger generations.
- To analyse experiences of resilience and social negotiation amid marginalization and cultural recognition.

Rationale of the study

Despite increasing legal recognition of transgender rights in India, transgender communities in Jammu and Kashmir remain underrepresented in scholarly literature, especially with regard to their cultural roles and recent shifts in identity assertion. To fully portray the dynamic interaction between tradition and change within the transgender community, this study is required. It offers a sociological lens to understand how they sustain, adapt and reimagine their roles across time. It broadens the discourse on agency, citizenship, dignity, and inclusion.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to gain a deep, contextual understanding of transgender experiences, rituals, cultural significance, and evolving identities in Jammu and Kashmir. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with 12 transgender individuals, including traditional ritual performers, astrologers, and emerging professionals such as activists, artists, social workers, philanthropists and entrepreneurs. The study employed

purposive sampling. The sample size is appropriate for a qualitative ethnographic study, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalization. Recruitment was particularly challenging because transgender communities in Jammu and Kashmir represent a marginalized and hard-to-reach population. Social stigma, discrimination, concerns about privacy, and the mobility of some participants limited access to potential respondents. Consequently, participant selection focused on individuals with diverse experiences and social roles who could provide rich, contextual insights into the phenomenon under study. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with subsequent interviews yielding no substantially new themes or perspectives. Semi-structured interviews explored themes of personal narratives, aspirations, discrimination, and resilience. In order to get insights into spiritual practices and gender performativity; non-participant observation was carried out during public performances, political events, and communal rituals such as Budh grah pujas, Navratri fasts, and badhai blessings.

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of ethical research, such as informed consent, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. All participants gave their explicit consent to participate and agreed to the use of their real names in the study. As the participants are public figures whose identities are already publicly known, pseudonyms were not used. At the time consent was obtained, none of the participants expressed any concerns about confidentiality or the disclosure of their identities. The case studies of Ashiba Gupta, Nitu Mai, Rubina Mahant, Shoaib Khan and Bebo were developed through social media analysis, interviews and field interactions to highlight generational shifts. Furthermore, document analysis of historical archives, media reports, legal texts (e.g., NALSA and the Transgender Persons Act) and scholarly literature helped to the contextual framework of the research.

Mythological and historical contexts

Transgender people are not a recent occurrence in Indian society; rather, they are intricately entwined with the mythology and history of the nation. Two classic epics of Indian culture, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, provide timeless illustrations of gender variation and the distinct roles of transgender characters.

In the Mahabharata, Shikhandi stands as one of the most prominent and complex characters who transcends conventional gender boundaries. During the Kurukshetra war, Shikhandi's ambiguous gender identity was strategically utilised by the Pandavas: Bhishma, bound by his vow never to fight a woman, lowers his weapons in Shikhandi's presence. This act creates the crucial opening for Arjuna to defeat Bhishma, altering the course of the war and, by extension, the fate of the Pandavas. According to Balagopalan (2023), Shikhandi's position thus embodies themes of justice, destiny, and the shattering of traditional gender

norms while also showing how non-binary identities can act as agents of significant alteration within the epic's social and moral order.

Similarly, the Ramayana offers a narrative that foregrounds the spiritual significance of transgender individuals. A group of hijras reportedly followed Lord Rama out of unwavering allegiance after he was banished to the forest. Inspired by their dedication, Rama bestowed upon them the special gift of bestowing fertility and prosperity on others; this revered function still influences the customs of hijra communities today (Medhi et al., 2016). This story not only legitimises their presence in religious and social ceremonies but also positions them as vital conduits between the human and the divine.

During the Mughal era, transgender individuals often referred to as eunuchs or khwajasaras held highly respected positions within the royal courts and harems. They were entrusted as custodians of the zenana (women's quarters), a role that demanded absolute discretion, loyalty, and authority. These individuals not only managed the daily affairs of the harem and protected its women but also served as confidential messengers and advisors to the emperor (Bashir & Pandey, 2023). Their proximity to power allowed them to influence court politics and administration.

But when British colonial administration arrived, this period of institutional respect and authority came to an abrupt end. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was passed by the British because they were unaccustomed to indigenous gender norms and uneasy with their prevalence. This law not only criminalised hijras and other transgender communities but also subjected them to relentless surveillance, public humiliation, and forced marginalization (Mishra, 2023). The colonial administration's policies dismantled their traditional livelihoods and social status, pushing transgender people to the fringes of society a legacy of stigma and exclusion that persists in various forms even today (Hinchy, 2019).

But in recent years, India has started to recognize the significance of transgender people in both history and culture. Restoring the dignity and rights of transgender people has been the goal of legislative initiatives like the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and judicial interventions like the Supreme Court's NALSA ruling (2014). With the focus of inclusion of transgender people into society and redressing historical marginalization; these initiatives mark a beginning of transformation from the criminalization of transgender people during the colonial era to present day members of India's social, cultural, civic life and at large in the society.

Evolving roles and adaptive resilience

The roles of transgender individuals in Jammu and Kashmir are not static; they are deeply fluid and responsive to the changing currents of society. As traditional cultural spaces such as badhai rituals or matchmaking begin to shift due to

urbanization, modernization, and the rise of individualistic lifestyles, transgender persons have demonstrated remarkable resilience by continuously reshaping their identities and roles within new contexts.

The Badhai tradition

One of the deeply and culturally rooted significant roles for transgender people in Jammu is that of badhai ritual. In this tradition people often call them hijras or locally as khusra/khusre (Plural). They are invited to give blessings during auspicious or life events like weddings and childbirth. The badhai ceremony has a lot of folk-religious meaning. It is not a show. These transgenders give blessings through song, dance and prayer. The blessings are said to bring protection, fertility and wealth to the family. People show a lot of respect, to transgenders during these ceremonies (Roy, 2016).

The respect shown to transgender professionals at these ceremonies reflects the significance of the badhai rite. The tradition of respecting them is very old. It is linked to stories and characters. People believe that their presence brings luck.

As one senior transgender expert said:

Humare yajman (hosts) hume khushi se jo dete hain hum woh le lete hai... unki wajha se humara ghar chalte hai...Bhagwan Ram jab 14 saal vanvas se wapis aaye the us din se aj tak hum log badhai hi mangte hai ...yehi humara kam hai aur humara haq bhi.

(Whatever our yajmans (hosts) graciously provide, we receive with appreciation. Our households operate thanks to their assistance. From the moment Lord Ram came back after 14 years of exile, we have been both seeking and giving blessings- this is not merely our duty, but our entitlement.)

This statement captures the spiritual validity and the socio-economic significance of the badhai tradition. It serves not just as a way to earn a living but also as a source of respect and acknowledgment within the community. Reasserting the inclusion of the transgender individual in the social and spiritual fabric of the community, the ceremony positions them as an essential cultural link between humanity and the divine. Transgender individuals in Jammu remain in demand for these rituals, even as they face marginalization in other spheres, underscoring their cultural importance and the lasting honor given to their role.

Astrological and planetary rituals

In the cultural and spiritual realm of Jammu, transgender people occupy a distinct and respected position, especially in astrology and ritual healing practices. Intrinsically tied to local belief systems is the connection between transgender individuals and Budh grah (Mercury), a planet associated with intellect, communication, and occasionally, karmic challenges. It is commonly

thought that an affected Budh in a person's kundali (horoscope) can lead to bad luck, misunderstandings, or insecurity. To mitigate these impacts, individuals from all caste and class backgrounds consistently approach transgender persons on Wednesdays to carry out Budh Nivaran ceremonies.

Clothing, sweets, or money are provided not as acts of charity but in acknowledgment of the sacred function these individuals fulfill in addressing cosmic imbalances. It is believed that transgender individuals, due to their in-between identity that transcends conventional male and female categories, have a spiritual power enabling them to take in or channel negative energies.

During field interviews, one transgender woman poignantly articulated this emotional and spiritual labour:

Hum logon ki balayein apne upar lete hain. Log Budhwar ko humare idhar aate hain, hume dhan-punya karke jaate hain taaki unka Budh grah theek ho jaye... hum unki musibatein apne upar le lete hain... hum bhi toh kisi ke bacche hain... lekin phir bhi society hume accept nahi karti.

(We bear the burdens of others' adversities and misfortunes. Individuals visit us on Wednesdays, extending charitable acts for merit, wishing to soothe their Mercury... we absorb their burdens... we are also someone's offspring... but society continues to reject us.)

This account captures the emotional weight and ethical dilemma central to their position. During moments of spiritual vulnerability, society seeks them out despite the marginalization they face. Their social exclusion is ironically reinterpreted as sacred closeness within the framework of folk cosmology. They embody both human negligence and divine intervention, serving as channels for the suffering of others. Their ceremonial functions gain symbolic value and spiritual authority; despite the social stigma they encounter (Reddy, 2005).

These interactions give transgender individuals deeper humanity, presenting them not as outcasts or mere beneficiaries of societal assistance, but as dynamic contributors of healing, strength, and spiritual work. Their lasting involvement in these ceremonies not only demonstrates the preservation of cultural customs but also highlights the resilience and societal significance of a community that persists in providing support, even when such support is rarely reciprocated.

Palmistry and religious devotion

Spiritual practices such as palm reading, healing rituals, and faith-based counseling have emerged as vital avenues for income and validation for the transgender community in Jammu. Numerous individuals in these communities excel in palmistry and astrological analysis. Depending on the individual's specific circumstances, this often involves practices such as fasting and planned visits to shrines or divine figures.

What distinguishes these rituals is the intensity of their religiosity, often described by community members as hyper-religious. They maintain ritual cleanliness, regularly go to temples, and strictly adhere to vegetarianism, often steering clear of garlic and onions. These all reflect their strict spiritual practices. Numerous individuals observe all nine days of fasting devotedly, particularly during Navratri, enhancing their spiritual dedication in the view of society.

This spiritual identity is personal and communal, as well as performative. In certain cases, transgender people assert that they are taken over by the goddess (Devi aana) and fall into trance-like conditions where they convey messages thought to be inspired by a divine source. Individuals from diverse caste and class backgrounds, including the educated and financially stable, seek their blessings and prophetic wisdom. As noted by David Hardiman in *The Coming of the Devi*, the practices of possession and trance significantly contribute to affirming sacred legitimacy, particularly for those on the fringes of mainstream society. The spiritual power acquired through divine possession frequently contests hierarchical standards and amplifies the voices of the marginalized (Hardiman, 1987).

While conducting fieldwork, one striking instance captured this interaction. A woman from a powerful caste murmured to a transgender professional:

“Mere liye bhi ek dhaga bana dena... Mata Rani se meri liye prarthana karna ki sab theek ho jaye.”

(“Kindly prepare a sacred thread for me as well. ... Pray to the Mother Goddess for everything to go well in my life.”)

These instances demonstrate a turnaround of standard power structures, where the transgender person, typically sidelined in society, emerges as a coveted spiritual leader. In these positions, individuals may touch their feet and present dakshina (gifts), not from a sense of sympathy, but as a demonstration of devotion and respect.

Hijras assert spiritual authority from mythological ties and ritual functions, enabling them to challenge their marginalization (Nanda, 1990). Nanda's ethnographic work highlights the importance of religious legitimacy in hijra identity, emphasizing how spiritual performances enable them to transform stigma into sanctity.

This type of hyper-religiosity enables transgender people to overcome societal stigma. It is not a request for acceptance; it is a transformation of position. Their spirituality is neither a form of escapism nor a belief in superstition. Instead, it is a purposeful cultural approach, a reaffirmation of agency via sacred power. When society dismisses their civil legitimacy, they seek cosmic legitimacy,

transforming into the messengers, mediators, and moral agents of their communities.

Matchmaking and changing cultural roles in Kashmir

Sociological research has recorded the historical significance of transgender individuals (locally referred to as Laanch) in the Kashmir Valley, who have traditionally served as esteemed matchmakers in arranged marriages. Regarded for their perceived impartiality, spiritual insight, and social grace, they were often sought out by families to mediate discussions between potential in-laws (Ahmad, 2020). Their peripheral social status unexpectedly enabled them to act as impartial intermediaries, managing the emotional and reputational intricacies associated with marriage discussions.

Nonetheless, this conventional role has diminished considerably with the increasing acceptance of love marriages, evolving family structures, and the urban development of Kashmiri society. The growing impact of digital media, personal preferences in relationships and the decline of extended family involvement have together reduced the need for transgender matchmaking. Due to this socio-cultural change, numerous transgender people in Kashmir have adjusted their roles and environments, participating in performance-related activities at weddings, nightclubs, cultural festivals, and private events. These performances frequently featuring cross-dressing, serve both as a means of income and as expressions of gender and cultural visibility.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity emphasizes that performance isn't the antithesis of authenticity but a way of expressing one's gender within social limitations (Butler, 1990).

"Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a 'doing' rather than a 'being'."

For numerous transgender people, these organized displays act as both political statements and personal realities, highlighting identities that are otherwise overlooked or repressed.

The existence of transgender individuals is characterized by a deep contradiction. They receive respect during ceremonies and significant life events but are often excluded in regular environments like schools, workplaces, and communities. This conditional acceptance reveals a more profound societal hypocrisy, where respect is afforded only when transgender individuals meet particular cultural roles (Sharma, 1989).

Their voices continually seek more than just symbolic acknowledgment; they insist on tangible rights, resources, and respect. As conventional roles diminish, particularly in urban and liberal environments, transgender individuals are creating new identities via digital platforms, fashion, the arts, activism, and

political expression. Nonetheless, these are not substitutions; they are adaptive extensions of their cultural repertoire. These adaptations demonstrate autonomy, strength, and creativity, countering the portrayal of the transgender person as simply a passive victim.

Contemporary transgender voices in Jammu and Kashmir

A new narrative is beginning to take shape; one defined by visibility, agency, and self-determination. The younger generation of transgender persons are stepping into political, professional, and creative domains with assertiveness and purpose.

Case study 1

Ashiba is first registered transgender officer in Jammu & Kashmir. She is helping people understand and accept transgender individuals. As a drug inspector, social worker and campaigner for transgender rights. Ashiba is a voice for equality and social change. She challenges the stigma against people who do not conform to gender norms. Her work helps create a society where transgender people are recognized, respected and empowered. Ashiba also trains government officials on transgender issues. She works under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment as a Master Trainer. Her training programs help public institutions understand their responsibilities towards transgender citizens. By connecting policy, public awareness and community engagement Ashiba shows how transgender leaders can change culture and society. Her work helps transgender people. Makes society more accepting and fairer.

Case study 2

Nitu mai does a lot of things for people. She helps people by giving them support, money and practical help. This makes her like a worker and someone important in the community. Nitu mai feels happy when she can help others. She thinks it is a gift that she can assist people in need. She does things to help society. For example, she has helped poor families pay for their daughters' weddings. She has assisted kids who're in trouble. She has also helped people who do not have access to services. Nitu mai organizes events like Mata Rani jagratas. She even creates jobs for people in her community. She pays her employees money than they would get elsewhere. This shows that she cares about being fair and helping her community. Nitu mai has done some amazing things. Nitu mai is an example of how people, from the transgender community can make a big difference in the form of social service, philanthropy, and grassroots leadership. They do work give to charity and lead their communities. This shows that transgender people are not just trying to be seen and accepted. They are also doing things for their communities. They are leading, taking care of people and making sure everyone is doing okay.

Case study 3

The emergence of Rubina Mahant in J&K's politics is a deal for transgender people. She is one of the openly transgender politicians in the region. Her entry into politics shows that things are changing for the better. More people from the transgender community are now part of politics. For a time, transgender individuals were part of our culture and society. They were not often in politics. Rubina is changing that. She wants to make sure that the concerns of transgender people are heard loud and clear. They should not be. Talked about in hushed tones. Rubina is fighting for the rights of transgender people. She wants them to be treated with respect and dignity. She believes that they should have the opportunities as everyone else. Her work is not just about the transgender community. She wants more people to participate in politics. She believes that diverse voices are important in decision-making. Her work is part of a conversation about equality and social justice. Rubina journey shows that politics can be a tool for change. She is stereotypes and making it easier for future generations. She is proving that anyone can be part of politics no their gender identity. Through her leadership she is inspiring conversations, about inclusion and rights. She wants to create a society for all.

Case study 4

Shoaib is a deal when it comes to how people see transgender people in the workplace in Kashmir. She is the transgender woman from that area to have a career in a big company. This is a thing because she is showing people that transgender people can do all kinds of jobs. What Shoaib has done is important for a reason. She has shown that she can overcome a lot of obstacles. A lot of transgender people have a time finding a good job because people do not understand them and they face a lot of discrimination. But Shoaib has shown that if you are good at what you do and you work hard you can succeed. It does not matter what gender you are. Shoaib's success is not about her. It is about what she means to people. When people see transgender people working in offices and other normal jobs it helps to change the way people think. It shows that transgender people can do all kinds of things. This helps companies to be more open. It helps people to understand transgender people better. For young LGBTQ+ people in Kashmir and other places Shoaib story is a one to hear. It shows that you can be ambitious and succeed. She is showing people that transgender people belong everywhere in places where they were not welcome before. Shoaib's career is part of a change that is happening. It shows that what matters is not what gender you are but how hard you work and what you can do; inspiring people to go after their goals and to make the workplace a better place for everyone. Shoaib is an example of what it means to be a professional and she is helping to make things better, for Shoaib and other transgender people.

Case study 5

Bebo is a 17 years old teenager who has already made a name for herself in the beauty and media world. She is a makeup artist from Srinagar. She is also transgender. Bebo uses media to show off her creative side and to make money. Her story is important because it shows how the internet can help people who are often left out. Bebo uses makeup and fashion to get people to notice her. She is very good at getting people to talk about her and her work. This helps her to break down the barriers that often stop transgender people from being seen and heard in public. She is an example of a new generation of transgender people who are using the internet to be themselves and to show off their talents. Bebo is very confident and creative. She has helped to make media a place where people can be real and be themselves. Bebo is also changing the way people think about beauty. She is showing that beauty is not about how you look but about how you feel and express yourself. Bebo is an artist and she is proving that talent has nothing to do with whether you are a man or a woman. She shows all that they can be successful and happy if they work hard and believe in themselves. Bebo is also showing that being visible and being you can be very powerful. Bebo's story is not about makeup and being famous on social media. It is about being strong and being true to yourself and an inspiration to people. She is helping to create a world that's more accepting and inclusive of everyone including transgender people, like Bebo.

Conclusion

The rise of individual or personalities such as Nitu Mai, Rubina Mahant, Ashiba, Shoaib, and Bebo represents a shift for transgender individuals in Jammu and Kashmir. These individuals are emerging as leaders within society; altering perception regarding transgender individuals. They are engaged in areas such as employment, politics, and social services while utilizing digital media to lead their communities. This demonstrates that transgender individuals are not merely hoping for acceptance from others. They are asserting themselves and establishing their own role in society. They demonstrate that transgender individuals can be pioneers and leaders, contributing to making society a better environment for all. The narratives of these individuals emphasize certain aspects: transgender individuals remain linked to their previous societal roles, such as bestowing blessings and participating in cultural events, while simultaneously creating new opportunities for themselves to generate income and voice their opinions in society. This demonstrates that transgender individuals are capable and that their societal roles are evolving. This isn't solely about personal rights; it also involves preserving our culture, improving our communities, and fostering innovation in society.

Future research could examine how digital platforms, educational systems, and government policies can assist transgender individuals. Longitudinal studies of

generational shifts within transgender communities and cross-regional studies across India would offer deeper insights into changing gender roles, social mobility and cultural integration. Such research can inform policies and comprehending the influence of transgender individuals on societal functions.

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Community-based resource management in the Western Himalaya: historical practices, governance structures and economic sustainability

Karam Singh, Rupesh Thakur & Shashi Kumar

ABSTRACT

The Western Himalayan region, comprising present-day Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, has long depended on locally devised institutions to govern forests, irrigation water, pastures and village common lands. This paper pursues three objectives: to trace the historical practices through which mountain communities organised access to kuhl irrigation, forests, shamlat commons and devta land custodianship; to examine the customary and statutory governance structures that have mediated the relationship between state and community; and to assess the economic sustainability of these arrangements amid climate change, out-migration and market integration. Using a historical-institutional methodology grounded in colonial gazetteers, settlement records and post-independence policy documents, the analysis applies Ostrom's (1990) eight design principles, supplemented by Agrawal's (2001) emphasis on socio-political embeddedness. On the first objective, historical practices, the kuhl and devta custodianship are shown to have survived through continual rule revision rather than fixed tradition. On the second, governance structures, these institutions meet most of Ostrom's internal design criteria but fail on two concerning the state's role, recognition of rights (DP7) and nested institutions (DP8), visible in the unresolved overlap between JFM committees, Gram Panchayats and devta committees. On the third, economic sustainability, the picture is one of real but constrained viability: climate variability, out-migration and weak NTFP value chains place genuine pressure on these arrangements, falling most heavily on women, who carry out most practical resource management but hold the least formal authority over it. Policy implications for decentralisation under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment are discussed.

Keywords: *Western Himalaya, Ostrom design principles, Joint Forest Management, Kuhl irrigation, Shamlat land.*

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Introduction

Background

The Western Himalayan tract, spanning Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand and historically connected to the hill regions of undivided Punjab, offers a useful setting for studying how communities manage shared resources over long periods. The terrain is demanding: steep gradients, small and scattered landholdings, short growing seasons, and a near-total dependence on forests, pastures and gravity-flow irrigation for subsistence farming meant that hill communities had to work out detailed rules about who could use what, when, and how, well before the colonial state arrived to impose its own ideas. What emerged were not open-access systems where anyone could take anything, but what the commons literature calls common property regimes: arrangements in which a defined group of users manages a resource collectively, with rules of access and exclusion that are distinct from both private ownership and state control (Ostrom 1990: 30).

Three resource types gave these arrangements their shape. Irrigation water, carried through earthen channels called *kuhls* from perennial streams to terraced fields, was the first. Forests, used for firewood, fodder, timber and non-timber forest produce (NTFPs), were the second; rights to these were eventually recorded in colonial settlement documents. Grazing land, in the form of village commons (*shamlat*) and high-altitude summer pastures, was the third. Running alongside these resource-specific systems was a further Himachali institution: the practice of recognising a local deity (*devta*) as the customary proprietor of village land and forest, with human custodians acting as the deity's agents in decisions about land use or transfer.

What sets the Western Himalayan case apart is not that community resource management exists here, as it does across the broader Hindu Kush Himalayan region, but the specific layering that has built up over time. Colonial forest settlements, post-independence land reform, the Joint Forest Management programme and constitutional decentralisation under the 73rd Amendment have each changed the rules without ever fully displacing what came before. Today, customary arrangements, colonial-era records and constitutional bodies all operate at the same time, over the same pieces of land, without any clear hierarchy between them. That overlap is the central governance problem this paper addresses.

The paper has three aims. First, to trace the historical practices through which Western Himalayan communities organised access to forests, water and pasture, and to show what changed under colonial rule. Second, to examine the governance structures, old and new, through which community control over resources has been exercised and disputed, with particular attention to how JFM committees and Gram Panchayats now relate to each other. Third, to assess

whether these community-based systems remain economically viable under the combined pressure of out-migration, climate variability and market integration.

Review of literature

The theoretical base for this paper is the distinction Ostrom (1990: 30–33) drew in response to Hardin's (1968: 1244) well-known argument that shared resources are inevitably degraded by individual self-interest. Hardin's conclusion, that commons must be either privatised or placed under state control, treats them as if they were always open-access. Ostrom's empirical response was to show that communities around the world had long been governing shared resources through their own rules, without waiting for markets or state agencies to step in (see also Wade 1988: 188; McKean 1992: 256; Baland and Platteau 1996: 297).

Ostrom's (1990: 90) more lasting contribution was to identify what makes some community rules durable and others fragile. Her eight design principles, covering clear membership boundaries, rules that fit local conditions, mechanisms for users to modify rules, monitoring, graduated sanctions, accessible dispute resolution, recognition by higher authorities, and nesting within broader institutional systems, have since become the standard checklist for evaluating commons governance. This paper applies all eight to the Western Himalayan evidence. The picture that emerges is mixed: the institutions reviewed here do reasonably well on the internal design criteria, but they fall short on the two principles that concern the state's role, specifically DP7 (recognition of rights) and DP8 (nested institutions).

Agrawal (2001: 1652) qualified the design-principles approach in ways that matter here. His comparative work on forest management in the Indian Himalaya showed that focusing only on internal institutional features can hide how much their performance depends on outside forces: colonial history, market pressures, and inequalities of caste, gender and land ownership. Agrawal and Yadama (1997: 448) showed how forest panchayats in Kumaon adjust to market and population pressures, while Agrawal and Ribot (1999: 480) argued that real devolution requires mechanisms to hold local decision-makers answerable, not just a formal transfer of authority. Both points bear directly on the JFM and panchayati raj discussion below.

Baker (2005: 149) studied the Kangra kuhls in detail and found that their durability owed less to any fixed design than to the capacity of kuhl communities to renegotiate arrangements over time. Ballabh, Balooni and Dave (2002: 2161) compared Van Panchayats with Forest Protection Committees and found that institutions with firmer legal standing tended to outlast those operating as conditional arms of the Forest Department. Guha (1989: 121) showed that the Van Panchayat was not a concession freely granted by the colonial government but something extracted through prolonged local protest against the commercialisation of Himalayan forests, a reading that puts both the

Van Panchayat and JFM in a rather different light. Jodha (1986: 1172) documented how heavily the rural poor depend on common property resources, a finding directly relevant to the shamlat and nautor discussions below. Misra and Kant (2004: 238) then showed, from a production-theoretic perspective, that JFM's incentive structure is less efficient than arrangements where communities hold secure tenure: when the Forest Department keeps ownership of the land, community committees have weaker reasons to invest in its long-term management.

The literatures on kuhls, Van Panchayats, JFM, shamlat and the devta system have mostly developed separately. This paper brings them together within a single analytical frame, treating the region's governance arrangements as historically produced systems that have changed alongside the state, the market and the environment over more than a century and a half.

Research objectives

Drawing on this literature, the paper pursues three objectives. First, to reconstruct the historical practices through which Western Himalayan communities organised access to forests, water and pasture, and to trace what colonial intervention changed. Second, to examine the governance structures, customary, colonial and post-colonial, through which community control over these resources has been exercised and contested, with particular attention to how JFM and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment sit alongside pre-existing customary institutions. Third, to assess the economic sustainability of these arrangements under the pressure of out-migration, climate variability and market integration.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative, historical-institutional synthesis of existing secondary scholarship, government records and legal-policy documents concerning community resource governance in the Western Himalaya, with the focus on Himachal Pradesh. No new field data were collected. This approach is well established in Himalayan commons scholarship: when the aim is to understand how governance arrangements have evolved and what drives their current performance, historical-institutional analysis is generally more appropriate than household surveys or statistical methods (Agrawal 2001: 1655; Baker 2005: 22). The paper's contribution is synthetic and interpretive rather than primarily empirical. Five categories of source material underpin the analysis. The first is peer-reviewed academic literature on common property resources, Himalayan Forest and irrigation governance, and pastoral livelihoods, including the foundational works cited in the literature review above. The second is government and legislative documents: the Himachal Pradesh Village Common Lands Vesting and Utilisation Act, 1974 (as amended); the National Forest Policy of 1988; the Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992;

and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The third, and central to the historical reconstruction of the kuhl system in particular, is colonial administrative and settlement literature: the Punjab District Gazetteers for Kangra, which record village-level irrigation and forest entitlements at the point of colonial settlement; Barnes and Diack's Settlement Reports for Kangra district, which contain the earliest systematic survey of kuhl command areas, water-sharing schedules and the kohli system; Anderson's Forest Settlement Records for the Kangra and Kullu forest divisions, which document the demarcation of reserved and protected forest and the customary rights recognised or extinguished in that process; and surviving judicial and police records of water-disputes and grazing offences from the same period, which show how the rules recorded in the settlement documents were actually enforced, or were not, in practice. The fourth is institutional and technical reports from bodies including The Energy and Resources Institute and the International Institute for Environment and Development. The fifth is field-based case studies and district-level journal articles on specific HP localities, transhumant communities and JFM committees.

Analytical framework

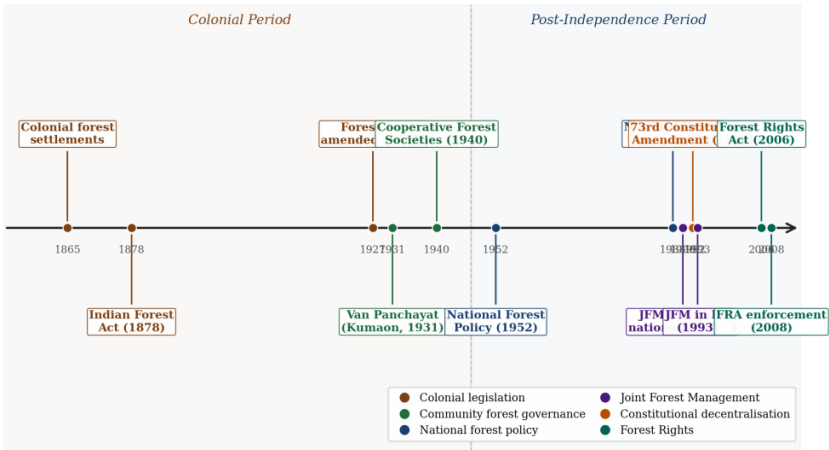
Materials were organised under three themes matching the paper's three objectives: historical practices, governance structures, and economic sustainability. Within each theme, the analysis uses Ostrom's (1990: 90) eight design principles as a structured checklist, supplemented by Agrawal's (2001: 1652) emphasis on socio-political context. Where a design principle concerns the historical period, the colonial gazetteers, settlement reports and forest records described above are read directly against that principle, rather than treated as general background; the Governance Structures sub-section and Table 2 show this in detail for the kuhl system. Two summary visualisations accompany the analysis: a heatmap scoring each design principle across four commons regimes (Figure 4), and a chart comparing the weight of exogenous pressures across three resource systems (Figure 5). Both are based on the authors' reading of the secondary literature reviewed in this paper; the scores represent qualitative judgements about the balance of evidence and should be treated as an analytical aid rather than as independently collected data. The geographical focus is Himachal Pradesh, with reference to the Kumaon and Garhwal divisions of Uttarakhand where the institutional comparison is relevant. Because this is a literature synthesis, the findings are limited by the coverage and currency of the sources consulted. Where the secondary literature reports findings from specific districts or time periods, this is noted in the text rather than generalised across the entire region.

Results and findings

Historical practices of community-based resource management

Resource governance in the Western Himalaya did not change in one clean break. What actually happened was a slow accumulation of legal and institutional layers, running from the colonial forest settlements of the 1860s through to the enforcement of the Forest Rights Act in 2008. Figure 1 maps the main milestones, providing the chronological frame for the five resource-specific practices discussed below.

Figure 1
Timeline of institutional evolution in Western Himalayan commons governance, 1860-2008.



Note. Compiled by the authors from Guha (1989: 121–140), Ballabh, Balooni and Dave (2002: 2153–2167), and Government of India (1988, s. 4.6; 1992, art. 243G; 2006, s. 3). The dashed line marks Indian Independence in 1947. JFM = Joint Forest Management; FRA = Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Kuhl Irrigation Systems: Water as a Managed Commons

The kuhl system of gravity-flow irrigation in the Kangra valley is the most thoroughly documented community governance arrangement in the Western Himalaya, and it is also the resource system for which the colonial documentary record is richest. Kuhls are earthen channels, typically two to five kilometres long, that divert water from perennial streams to terraced fields, serving several villages arranged along the channel. Baker’s (2005: 149) historical and ethnographic study of Kangra kuhls showed that their persistence across more than a century of political change owes less to any fixed design than to the willingness of kuhl communities, organised under an elected kohli, to

renegotiate labour obligations, water-sharing schedules and decision-making authority when conditions change.

Applying Ostrom's design principles to the kuhl system in detail, rather than at the level of general description, requires the colonial documentary record rather than secondary commentary alone. The Punjab District Gazetteer for Kangra recorded, village by village, which households held rights to which channel and in what proportion, giving DP1 (clearly defined boundaries) a concrete historical basis: boundaries were not informal understandings but entries in an administrative register that the colonial revenue system itself relied upon. Barnes and Diack's Settlement Reports go further, setting out the kohli system, the rotation of irrigation turns (locally termed *bari*), and the labour obligations attached to channel maintenance in enough operational detail to assess DP2 (congruence with local conditions) directly against the documentary baseline rather than against later ethnographic reconstruction. Where Baker (2005: 152) describes the Sunday-labour adaptation of the 1980s as evidence of institutional flexibility, the Settlement Reports supply the earlier baseline against which that later adaptation can be measured: the labour schedule recorded by Barnes and Diack in the late nineteenth century was itself already a negotiated compromise between agricultural and ritual calendars, not a fixed point that the 1980s shift departed from.

Anderson's Forest Settlement Records, compiled for the Kangra and Kullu forest divisions during the same period, are less directly about kuhls but matter for DP1 and DP8 because they show how the colonial state demarcated forest boundaries that fed the catchments on which kuhl flow depended, without any formal coordination between the forest settlement process and the separate irrigation settlement process recorded by Barnes and Diack. This is an early instance of the nesting failure (DP8) that this paper argues persists into the present: two colonial administrative processes, forest settlement and irrigation settlement, operated over the same watershed without being linked to each other, a pattern that recurs in the JFM/Gram Panchayat overlap discussed under Customary Institutions in the Contemporary Legal Setting, below.

Surviving judicial and police records from the same districts, covering disputes over water theft, unauthorised channel diversion and grazing trespass, provide direct evidence for DP5 (graduated sanctions) that secondary literature alone cannot supply. These records show that customary penalties for water theft, ranging from a warning by the kohli to formal exclusion from the next irrigation turn, were treated by colonial courts as a matter for the kuhl committee in the first instance, with police and judicial involvement only where the customary process had broken down. This division of labour between customary and state enforcement is itself a form of the graduated sanctions Ostrom's design principles call for, and the records show it operating with reasonable consistency through the early twentieth century. What the documentary record does not

show, because the relevant records have not survived in usable form for the more recent period, is whether this same graduated structure has held up since independence; this is one of the gaps identified in the Conclusion.

The remaining four design principles can also be read against this same body of colonial evidence, though the documentary record speaks to them with varying degrees of detail. DP3 (collective-choice arrangements) is visible in Barnes and Diack's account of the kohli's election and removal procedure: the Settlement Reports record that a kohli who failed to maintain the channel fairly could be replaced by a vote of the user households, a mechanism that meets Ostrom's requirement that those affected by a rule can participate in changing it. DP4 (monitoring) is documented less formally: the Gazetteer and the Settlement Reports both note that water theft was typically detected by neighbouring cultivators rather than by any appointed official, consistent with the social monitoring that Baker (2005: 160) found still operating in the twentieth century. DP6 (conflict-resolution mechanisms) is the principle for which the judicial and police records are most directly informative beyond the sanctions evidence already discussed: the same records show a two-step pattern in which the kohli or village council heard a dispute first, with the colonial courts hearing an appeal only if the customary forum's decision was rejected by one of the parties, giving the kuhl system an accessible, low-cost first-instance forum of the kind DP6 calls for. DP7 (recognition of rights by higher authorities) is where the Riwaj-i-Abpashi mattered most directly: by codifying kuhl water rights in a formal settlement record, the colonial administration gave the kuhl committee's authority a degree of legal recognition that the JFM committee, discussed under Post-Independence Forest Policy and Joint Forest Management, above, has never received in comparable form. Taken together with the DP1, DP2, DP5 and DP8 evidence above, the colonial documentary record supports an assessment against all eight of Ostrom's design principles for the kuhl system specifically, rather than the more general treatment of community irrigation that earlier accounts of this case have offered.

The colonial state complicated the kuhl system's flexibility when it began recording customary irrigation entitlements in the formal settlement documents described above, most notably the Riwaj-i-Abpashi (record of irrigation customs). Writing the rules down gave them legal weight, but it also froze them at a particular moment, making later adaptation harder, a tension visible in the gap between what Barnes and Diack recorded in the 1880s and what Baker (2005: 152) found still operating, in modified form, a century later.

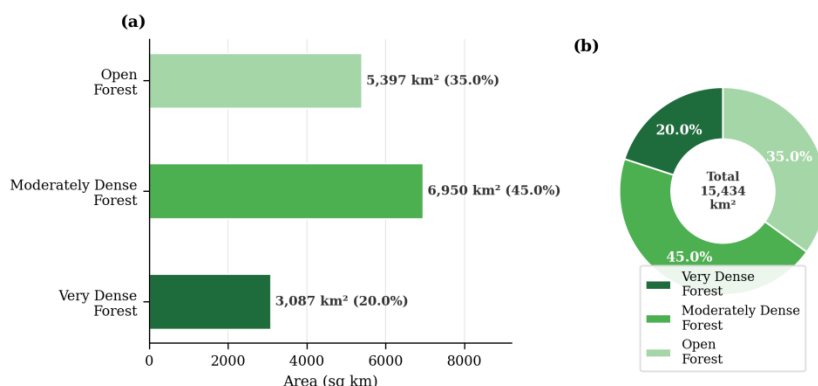
Customary Forest Use and Colonial Settlement Records

Before the colonial Forest Department arrived in earnest, hill communities in the Western Himalaya exercised a wide range of customary rights over forests: firewood, fodder, timber for construction and implements, grazing, and a variety of non-timber products including medicinal plants, wild fruit, resin and fibre.

The resource base over which these rights operated remains large. According to the Forest Survey of India (2019a: 12), Himachal Pradesh has 15,433.52 km² of recorded forest cover, equal to 27.72 per cent of the state's total area of 55,673 km². Figure 2 shows how this is distributed across very dense, moderately dense and open forest categories.

Figure 2

Forest cover of Himachal Pradesh by canopy density class: (a) area in km²; (b) proportional distribution.



Note. Data from Forest Survey of India (2019a: 12–14). Total recorded forest cover 15,433.52 km² (27.72% of state area of 55,673 km²). Areas are approximate: Very Dense Forest 3,087 km²; Moderately Dense Forest 6,950 km²; Open Forest 5,397 km².

The colonial forest settlement process, which ran through the hill districts roughly from the 1860s to the 1920s, produced two key documents for each village: the Wazib-ul-Arz (customary rights register) and the Naqsha-Haq-Bartan (record of rights of use). Anderson's Forest Settlement Records, discussed above in relation to the kuhl catchments, are the fullest surviving account of how these entitlements were recorded and, in many cases, narrowed during the settlement process. Both the Wazib-ul-Arz and the Naqsha-Haq-Bartan remain legally relevant in Himachal Pradesh today. The Indian Forest Act of 1878, and its 1927 successor, then divided forests into reserved, protected and village categories, steadily transferring control of the better timber land to the state. This provoked widespread resistance, most visibly in the Kumaon and Garhwal hills that Guha (1989: 121) documented, but also in the Kangra hills of what is now Himachal Pradesh, where the Punjab Gazetteer records repeated petitions against the restriction of grazing and fuelwood rights through the early twentieth century.

Village Commons, Shamlat Land and the Practice of Nautor

Alongside forests and irrigation channels, most Western Himalayan villages maintained an area of undivided common land called shamlat, used for grazing, threshing, fuelwood collection, and a customary practice called nautor. Under nautor, a cultivator could, with community sanction recorded by the revenue patwari, bring a piece of waste or common land under the plough. For many landless and marginal households in a terrain where flat cultivable ground was scarce and land markets offered little to those without capital, nautor was how their families had come to hold any land at all (Jodha 1986: 1172).

The Himachal Pradesh Village Common Lands Vesting and Utilisation Act of 1974 (Government of Himachal Pradesh 1974, s. 3) upended this by vesting all village common and waste land in the state government. Overnight, long-standing nautor occupants became unauthorised encroachers on government land. The 2001 amendment to the Act restored some rights to existing occupants, but the basic pattern has held: every few years the legal status of shamlat land is renegotiated through the legislature, with outcomes that differ sharply depending on caste, landholding status and local political connections.

Faith-Based Land Custodianship: The Devta System

The devta system has no close equivalent in the mainstream commons literature. Across much of Himachal Pradesh, customary practice treats the local deity, called a devta, as the proprietor of village land and forest. Human custodians, variously called kardars, khunds, or members of a devta committee, act as the deity's agents in decisions about how that land is used, leased or transferred. Legal ownership in the conventional sense gives way to a collective, ritually sanctioned guardianship: no individual, household or even the village as a whole is understood to have final authority over the land.

In practice, this functions as an informal consent mechanism. Development proposals and land transactions that formal law might treat as straightforward, such as land acquisition for a road or a hydropower project, require negotiation with the devta committee in many villages. There are documented cases in which government agencies have approached devta committees through customary channels alongside formal land acquisition proceedings, suggesting that the two systems coexist in ways that have practical consequences for how land is actually governed.

Transhumant Pastoralism and Seasonal Resource Use

Vertical transhumance, the seasonal movement of livestock from low-altitude winter pastures to high-altitude summer grazing grounds, has been both a livelihood strategy and a governance institution across the Western Himalaya for centuries. The Gaddi community of Chamba and Kangra has organised this movement around customary rights to specific alpine pastures called bugyals and dhar, with migratory routes, seasonal timing tied to snowmelt, and inter-

group scheduling arrangements that allow pastures to regenerate during the rest period (Bhasin 2013: 91). Pastoral and sedentary communities were historically linked by a simple exchange: animal manure for temporary grazing access on agricultural terraces.

Governance structures: from customary institutions to statutory co-management

Table 1 lists the principal governance institutions that have operated over Western Himalayan resources from the pre-colonial period to the present. The sub-sections below trace how they developed and how they relate to each other today.

Table 1

Principal resource governance institutions in the Western Himalaya: period of origin, resource governed and locus of authority.

Institution	Period of origin	Resource governed	Locus of authority
Kuhl Committee (Kohli system)	Pre-colonial; codified in settlement records, 1860s–1920s	Irrigation water	Kuhl-user community; kohli as elected channel manager
Wazib-ul-Arz / forest settlement rights	c. 1860s–1920s	Forest produce; grazing	Individual and village entitlements recorded by the colonial state
Van Panchayat	1931 (Kumaon); later extended to parts of HP	Community forests	Elected village forest council of 5–9 members; statutory recognition
Cooperative Forest Society	1940 (Kangra, HP)	Forests (degraded tracts)	Society under Forest Department supervision; no vested tenure
Devta committee / kardar / khund	Pre-colonial; continues to operate	Village land; forest tracts	Village deity as notional proprietor; human custodians as agents
JFM Committee / Sanjhi Van Yojana	1990 (national); 1993 (HP)	Degraded forest land	Joint: Forest Department and village committee; Department retains land title
Gram Panchayat / Gram Sabha	1992 (73rd Constitutional Amendment)	Devolved subjects including some forestry functions	Elected panchayat and village general assembly; constitutional standing

Note. Sources: Guha (1989: 121–140); Baker (2005: 88–152); Ballabh, Balooni and Dave (2002: 2153–2167); Government of India (1988, s. 4.6; 1992, art. 243G; 2006, s. 3); Government of Himachal Pradesh (1974, s. 3–4). HP = Himachal Pradesh; JFM = Joint Forest Management.

Colonial-Era Institutional Experiments

The local resistance to colonial forest law that Guha (1989: 121) documented was not without result. In the Kumaon division, the Kumaun Panchayati Forest Rules of 1931 created the Van Panchayat: an elected village body of five to nine members with authority to manage a demarcated forest tract that the state handed over for community use. Colonial forest records from the period noted that forests under Van Panchayat management were often in better condition than adjoining state-reserved forests, an observation that gave early, if anecdotal, weight to the idea that community management could outperform centralised administration.

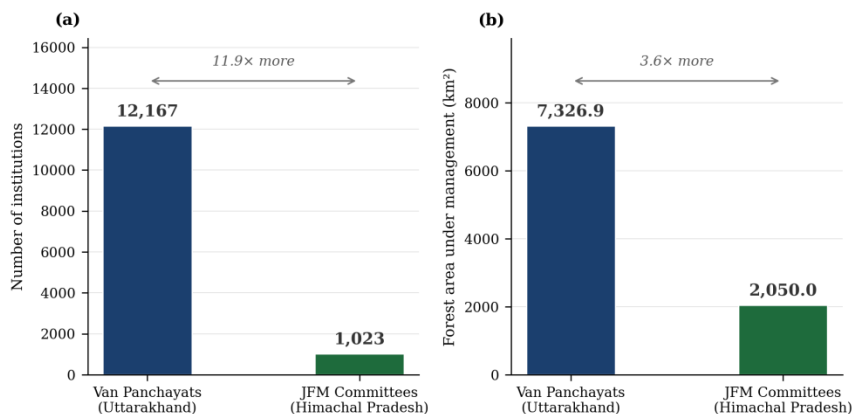
In the Kangra district, then part of Punjab province, a parallel experiment produced the Cooperative Forest Society in 1940. The design was different. Unlike the Van Panchayat, which was a statutory body with vested land, the Cooperative Forest Society operated under closer Forest Department supervision and without secure tenure over the forest it managed. The Van Panchayat has since expanded to over 12,000 units in Uttarakhand; the Cooperative Forest Society has remained a limited and locally bounded institution. This difference in trajectory is consistent with Ballabh, Balooni and Dave's (2002: 2161) finding: institutions with firmer legal standing tend to outlast those that depend on continued departmental goodwill.

Post-Independence Forest Policy and Joint Forest Management

The National Forest Policy of 1988 (Government of India 1988, s. 4.6) was the first post-independence policy document to commit the Indian government in explicit terms to community participation in forest management, stating that "growing requirements of fuelwood, fodder and small timber" should be met through schemes "involving the close association of the local communities." The Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme followed in 1990, reaching Himachal Pradesh in 1993 and later reinforced through the state's Sanjhi Van Yojana of 1998. Under JFM, village-level institutions, called Village Forest Development Committees or Village Forest Development Societies in HP, are supposed to manage degraded forest land jointly with the Forest Department, sharing the usufruct benefits that result. By the early 2010s, HP had around 1,023 such committees managing roughly 205,000 hectares of degraded forest, or about 13 per cent of the state's recorded forest area (The Energy and Resources Institute 2016: 34). Figure 3 sets this scale against the Van Panchayat record in Uttarakhand.

Figure 3

Comparative scale of statutory community forest institutions: (a) number of institutions; (b) forest area under management.



Note. Van Panchayat data from Forest Survey of India (2019b: 9). JFM committee data from The Energy and Resources Institute (2016: 34). The gap in both institution count and managed area reflects the Van Panchayat's longer history and stronger statutory standing rather than differences in forest endowment alone.

Field assessments of these committees paint a consistent picture: low awareness among village residents of how the committees work, weak links between Forest Department officials and committee members, unreliable funding, insufficient training, and benefit-sharing arrangements that often favour better-off households. Misra and Kant (2004: 238) provided a production-theoretic explanation for why this outcome might be expected: when the Forest Department retains ownership of the land being managed, community committees have a weaker stake in its long-term productivity than they would if they held secure tenure. Under JFM, authority is delegated rather than vested, which matters for how much effort communities put in.

Panchayati Raj and Constitutional Decentralisation

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 established a three-tier Panchayati Raj system across most Indian states, with the Gram Sabha, the village general assembly, as the basic unit of local self-government. Article 243G, read with the Eleventh Schedule, gave state legislatures the power to devolve specified subjects, including “social forestry and farm forestry” and “minor forest produce” (Government of India 1992, art. 243G, sch. 11, items 6 and 7), to Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Himachal Pradesh, fifteen departments including forestry were nominally decentralised from the mid-1990s.

In practice, the devolution of forest powers has been slow and contested. The result is a situation where two formally constituted bodies, the JFM committee

and the Gram Panchayat, both claim some authority over the same forest tract, with no formal rule about which body takes precedence. Neither is nested within the other in the sense that Ostrom's eighth design principle requires, a continuation of the same uncoordinated overlap between colonial forest settlement and irrigation settlement noted earlier in the discussion of the kuhl system. This is not a minor administrative inconvenience: it means there is no clear accountability chain for day-to-day forest management decisions, and no agreed mechanism for resolving disagreements between the two bodies.

Customary Institutions in the Contemporary Legal Setting

Despite more than a century of statutory intervention, customary institutions have not been replaced by their statutory successors. They persist alongside them. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 (Government of India 2006, s. 3), enforced from 2008, was intended to restore individual forest rights and community forest resource rights free of Forest Department discretion, but its implementation in Himachal Pradesh has been limited: many long-standing occupants of forest and shamlat land still lack secure legal tenure (Himdhara Environment Research and Action Collective 2021: 4). Devta committees, kardars and khund functionaries continue to make land use decisions in numerous villages, operating alongside the Gram Panchayat and the Forest Department rather than being replaced by them. This co-existence of customary, colonial-derived and constitutional governance is not transitional; it is the durable condition of resource management in the Western Himalaya.

Economic sustainability of community-based resource management

Contribution to Rural Livelihoods

Community-managed resources still matter for rural livelihoods across the Western Himalaya. Firewood and fodder collection, timber use under customary entitlement, NTFP gathering, resin tapping, basket-making and wool-working remain important for households without much access to irrigated land. Sharma, Sharma and Devi (2019: 310), in an economic study of NTFP-dependent households in the high hill temperate zone of Himachal Pradesh, found that the income people actually receive from forest produce depends less on how much the forest contains than on how the trading chain is organised: those who control storage, processing and marketing keep most of the value, while collecting households receive a relatively small share. Among the Gaddi communities of Chamba and Bharmour, transhumant pastoralism remains the primary livelihood base, though field-based research consistently finds that fewer young people are willing to take on the physical demands of seasonal migration and that climate-driven shifts in snowmelt timing are disrupting established movement patterns.

Forest-Based Employment and Unrealised Potential

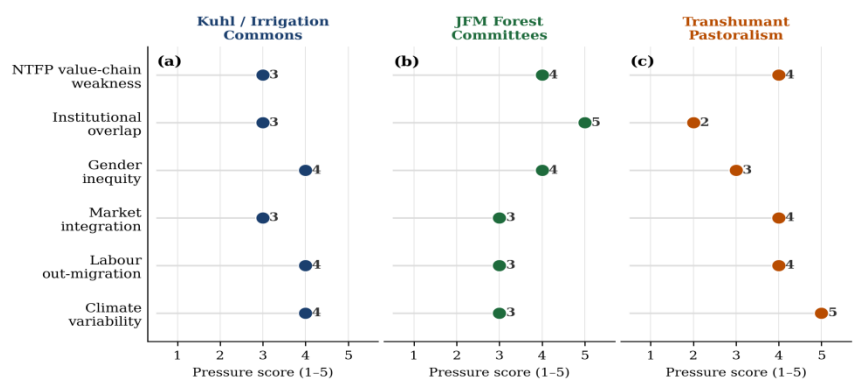
JFM has created seasonal employment in HP, mainly through plantation work, protection patrolling and forest restoration activities, which the Energy and

Resources Institute (2016: 34) estimates in the range of several lakh person-days annually. This is not trivial for households near JFM-managed tracts, but it is seasonal and supplementary rather than a primary income source. Several assessments note that much more income could in principle be retained locally if NTFP processing happened in the hills rather than in distant markets, but limited infrastructure, poor market connections and the dominance of intermediary traders have so far prevented this from happening at scale (International Institute for Environment and Development 2008: 9).

Climate Change, Out-Migration and Institutional Strain

Three pressures are bearing on the economic viability of community resource institutions across the region. First, declining and erratic winter precipitation is reducing the stream flow that kuhl/s depend on and shifting the snowmelt timing that governs Gaddi migration routes. Second, sustained out-migration of working-age men toward urban employment is reducing the number of people available for collective maintenance tasks, increasing the burden on women who remain, and in some cases weakening the social ties on which kuhl committees and JFM committees depend. Third, deeper market integration is changing what people want from forests and pastures, sometimes reducing extraction pressure but also reducing the proportion of households with a direct stake in collective management. Figure 5 summarises how these pressures bear differently on each of the three resource systems examined in this paper.

Figure 5
Exogenous pressures on community resource institutions in the Western Himalaya: (a) kuhl/irrigation commons; (b) JFM forest committees; (c) transhumant pastoralism



Note. Authors’ qualitative assessment based on secondary literature reviewed in this paper. Scores (1 = low pressure; 5 = high pressure) summarise the weight of evidence across sources and are a synthesis aid rather than independently collected data. NTFP = non-timber forest product.

Gender runs as a thread through all three pressures. Women in Himalayan communities generally carry primary responsibility for firewood and fodder collection, water fetching and much of the daily work of farming. They are, in a practical sense, the people who manage these resources from day to day. Yet they hold a minority presence in the formal bodies, kuhl committees, JFM committees, devta committees and Gram Panchayats, that make the rules under which resources are managed. Policy provisions for women's representation in JFM committees exist on paper; in practice, field assessments consistently find that formal inclusion has not translated into substantive decision-making power.

Discussion

What the design-principles assessment shows for the kuhl system

The Kuhl Irrigation Systems sub-section above set out what the colonial documentary record, the Punjab Gazetteer, Barnes and Diack's Settlement Reports, Anderson's Forest Settlement Records, and surviving judicial and police records, shows about the kuhl system against each of Ostrom's eight design principles in turn. Brought together, the picture is more precise than a general claim that the kuhl system is a well-functioning common. DP1 (boundaries), DP2 (congruence with local conditions), DP3 (collective-choice arrangements), DP4 (monitoring), DP6 (conflict-resolution mechanisms) and DP7 (recognition of rights) are all supported, in varying degrees of strength, by specific documentary evidence rather than general inference. DP1 and DP2 are the most strongly supported: the Gazetteer and Barnes and Diack's reports show that command areas, water-sharing turns and labour obligations were documented in enough operational detail, more than a century ago, that present-day practice can be measured directly against a historical baseline rather than inferred from oral tradition alone. DP5 (graduated sanctions) is supported in a more qualified way: judicial and police records confirm that a working two-tier system of customary and state enforcement existed in the colonial period, but the documentary trail for the post-independence period is much thinner, so this paper cannot say with the same confidence that the same graduated structure still functions today. DP8 (nested institutions) is where the historical and the contemporary evidence converge most clearly on a weakness: the uncoordinated relationship between forest settlement and irrigation settlement visible in Anderson's records under colonial administration reappears, in a different institutional form, in the unresolved relationship between JFM committees and Gram Panchayats today. This is not a coincidence of two unrelated administrative failures a century apart; it points to a structural pattern in how Himachal Pradesh's resource governance has been built, in separate, parallel administrative tracks that were never required to coordinate with one another. The Kuhl Irrigation Systems sub-section sets out the corresponding evidence for DP3, DP4, DP6 and DP7, completing the eight-point assessment for the kuhl system specifically.

What the design-principles assessment shows across all four regimes

Applying Ostrom’s (1990) eight design principles to the wider Western Himalayan evidence, as summarised in Table 2 and shown in Figure 4, produces a pattern consistent with the kuhl-specific finding above. The region’s commons institutions do reasonably well on the principles that concern internal community organisation, particularly DP2 (fit with local conditions) and DP4 (monitoring). They do poorly on the two principles that concern the state’s role: DP7 (recognition of rights by higher authorities) and DP8 (nesting within larger institutional systems). The implication is direct: the main constraint on Western Himalayan commons governance is not a shortage of community capacity or local knowledge. It is the state’s failure to provide the legal recognition and institutional architecture that community bodies need to work properly, a failure with roots that, as the kuhl evidence shows, extend back into the colonial administrative record itself.

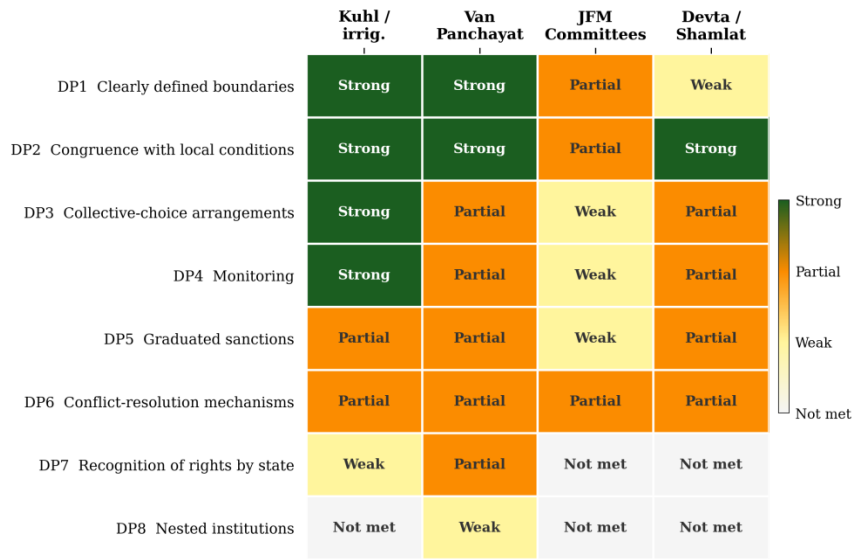
Table 2
Evaluation of Ostrom’s (1990) design principles in the context of Western Himalayan commons institutions.

Ostrom’s (1990) design principle	Assessment	Evidence and constraints
DP1: Clearly defined boundaries	Partially met	Kuhl command areas recorded in Barnes and Diack’s Settlement Records; Van Panchayat tracts demarcated under Anderson’s Forest Records; shamlat boundaries disputed after the 1974 HP Act
DP2: Congruence with local conditions	Met, at least historically	Kuhl schedules follow crop cycles; Gaddi migration routes track snowmelt; devta protocols align with seasonal ecology
DP3: Collective-choice arrangements	Variable	Kohli elections work; JFM committee participation skewed by caste and gender; devta deliberation is inclusive but informal
DP4: Monitoring	Working but largely informal	Kuhl users watch water flows socially; JFM patrolling is underfunded; devta ritual inspection adds a layer of oversight
DP5: Graduated sanctions	Weakening	Customary fines for water theft persist in kuhl systems, as recorded in colonial judicial and police records of water disputes; formal JFM sanctions are applied inconsistently
DP6: Conflict-resolution mechanisms	Layered but overlapping	Village councils, revenue courts, devta mediation, JFM hearings and Gram Panchayat all operate without clear boundaries between them

DP7: Recognition of rights by higher authorities	Contested	Van Panchayats have statutory recognition; JFM committees operate under conditional departmental permission; FRA 2006 implementation in HP has been limited
DP8: Nested institutions	Largely absent	JFM committees and Gram Panchayats operate in parallel without any formal nesting arrangement; the most persistent structural gap in the region

Note. Authors’ assessment based on the secondary and colonial-era sources reviewed in this paper, including Barnes and Diack’s Settlement Reports, Anderson’s Forest Settlement Records, and surviving judicial and police records for the kuhl system specifically. DP = design principle. Evaluation criteria follow Ostrom (1990: 88–102) and Agrawal (2001: 1649–1672). HP = Himachal Pradesh; JFM = Joint Forest Management; FRA = Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Figure 4
Ostrom’s (1990) design principles assessed across four Western Himalayan commons regimes.



Note. Authors’ qualitative assessment based on the secondary and colonial-era sources reviewed in this paper. Scores (0 = not met; 1 = weakly met; 2 = partially met; 3 = strongly met) represent the authors’ reading of the balance of evidence across sources and should be treated as a synthesis aid rather than independently collected data. DP = design principle.

This finding sits alongside Agrawal’s (2001: 1652) critique: an exclusive focus on internal design can hide how much a community institution’s performance depends on the political and economic context around it. The kuhl system,

which scores well on most design criteria, is under real pressure from climate change and out-migration that no redesign at the village level can resolve on its own. The conflict between JFM committees and Gram Panchayats similarly cannot be fixed by communities; it requires a deliberate policy decision about which body holds precedence.

JFM in comparative perspective: what the van panchayat record shows

Table 3 and Figure 3 compare Van Panchayats and JFM committees across nine dimensions. The comparison is not flattering to JFM. On statutory basis, tenure security, decision-making authority, scale of coverage and benefit sharing, the Van Panchayat model consistently offers communities more than JFM does. Forest Survey of India data place the number of Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand at 12,167, jointly managing 7,326.88 km², against 1,023 JFM committees managing roughly 2,050 km² in Himachal Pradesh (Forest Survey of India 2019b: 9; The Energy and Resources Institute 2016: 34). Part of the difference reflects the longer history of the Van Panchayat, dating to 1931 against 1993 for JFM in HP, but part reflects the Van Panchayat’s stronger legal standing and its clearer separation from departmental control. For HP policymakers, the Van Panchayat experience suggests that community forest governance works better when communities hold secure tenure and real decision-making authority rather than conditional roles under departmental supervision.

Table 3
Comparative analysis of Van Panchayat (Uttarakhand) and Joint Forest Management committee (Himachal Pradesh) across nine institutional dimensions.

Dimension	Van Panchayat (Uttarakhand)	JFM Committee (Himachal Pradesh)
Origin	1931; community resistance to colonial forest law led the colonial government to concede limited self-governance	1990/1993; government-initiated programme; Forest Department-led
Legal basis	Kumaun Panchayati Forest Rules, 1931; strong statutory standing	State government circulars; weaker and more conditional legal basis
Land tenure	Forest tract vested in the Van Panchayat	Land remains with the Forest Department; community holds conditional usufruct
Decision-making authority	Van Panchayat makes primary management decisions	Forest Department retains final authority; community role is conditional

Scale (c. 2019)	12,167 councils; 7,326.88 km ² (Uttarakhand)	1,023 committees; approximately 2,050 km ² (Himachal Pradesh)
Benefit sharing	Community keeps timber and NTFP sale proceeds	Usufruct is shared; the state retains a significant share of timber revenue
Gender representation	Weak historically; slowly improving under 73rd Amendment provisions	Policy provisions exist; actual decision-making influence remains limited
Relationship with Gram Panchayat	Generally cooperative; the two have coexisted for decades	Overlapping jurisdiction; no formal agreement about which body has precedence
Durability	High: over 90 years old and expanded to 12,167 councils	Moderate: dependent on continued departmental support; institutionally fragile

Note: Sources: Ballabh, Balooni and Dave (2002: 2153–2167); Forest Survey of India (2019b: 9); The Energy and Resources Institute (2016: 34); Misra and Kant (2004: 229–248). Scale differences between the two states reflect both the longer institutional history of the Van Panchayat and its stronger statutory standing.

Caste, gender and who actually benefits

Throughout this paper, a recurring problem with the governance arrangements under review is that they are nominally collective but not equitably so. The shamlat case shows this most clearly: who got nautor rights, who became an encroacher in 1974, and who benefited from the 2001 amendment were all shaped by caste hierarchies and local political networks rather than any neutral principle. JFM committee participation data from several HP districts show the same pattern: general-category households are more active participants than Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Class or Scheduled Tribe households, even where formal membership rules make no such distinction.

The gender dimension is, if anything, more pervasive. Women do most of the work that depends on these resources, firewood collection, fodder gathering, water fetching, daily farming. In that sense they are already managing these commons, informally, every day. But they hold few formal seats in the bodies that set the rules. The gap between who does the work and who makes the decisions is not a minor equity concern; it is a governance failure that weakens the institutions themselves, since decision-making processes that exclude the people with the most direct knowledge of resource conditions are less likely to produce good management outcomes.

Policy Priorities

Four priorities emerge from the analysis. First, the jurisdictional overlap between JFM committees, Gram Panchayats and devta committees needs a formal resolution. A workable approach would be to give the Gram Sabha formal precedence over natural resource management decisions within each village, with JFM committees reporting to the panchayat rather than operating alongside it. Second, the intermediary-dominated structure of NTFP value chains deserves attention in its own right. Investment in local processing, cold storage and collective marketing could do more for household incomes in forest-dependent communities than changes to extraction rules. Third, the genuine inclusion of women in committee decision-making, beyond formal reservation provisions that often result in proxy representation by male relatives, needs to be treated as an institutional design question rather than a welfare add-on. Fourth, the customary tenure records, the Wazib-ul-Arz, the Riway-i-Abpashi and the devta custodianship arrangements, need formal documentation and legal recognition before development pressure erases what remains of their practical authority.

Conclusion

This paper set out to do three things: trace the historical practices of community resource management in the Western Himalaya, examine the governance structures that have shaped them, and assess their economic sustainability. Taking each in turn shows what the evidence in this paper actually supports. On the first objective, historical practices, the record is now considerably more concrete than a general claim that these institutions are old and adaptive. The Punjab Gazetteer, Barnes and Diack's Settlement Reports, Anderson's Forest Settlement Records, and surviving judicial and police records together show that the kuhl, the customary forest settlement, the nautor right, devta custodianship and transhumant pastoralism were never static customs. They were documented, contested and revised within the colonial administrative system itself, long before independence, and they have continued to be revised since. Baker's (2005: 152) account of the Kangra kuhl is the clearest illustration of this continuity: the institution has endured through selective adaptation, not through resistance to change, and the nineteenth-century settlement records give that claim a documentary baseline that secondary literature alone could not provide.

On the second objective, governance structures, applying Ostrom's (1990) design principles to this combined historical and contemporary evidence gives an unambiguous answer about where the weaknesses lie. Western Himalayan commons institutions do reasonably well on the internal criteria: their rules generally fit local conditions, monitoring works through social networks, and dispute-resolution mechanisms exist, as both the colonial records and the present-day evidence confirm. Where they fall short is on the two principles that

concern the relationship with the state: DP7, recognition of rights by higher authorities, and DP8, nesting within larger institutional systems. The kuhl evidence traced above shows that this is not a new problem created by JFM; Anderson's Forest Settlement Records show the same uncoordinated, parallel-track pattern operating between forest and irrigation administration under colonial rule. Resolving the present confusion between JFM committees and Gram Panchayats, and giving community forest bodies the kind of statutory security that Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand have had since 1931, would address both shortfalls at once. On the third objective, economic sustainability, the evidence points to real but constrained viability. Climate variability, out-migration and structural weaknesses in NTFP value chains are placing genuine pressure on these institutions, and that pressure falls most heavily on women, who carry the largest practical burden of resource management but hold the least formal authority over it. Institutions that exclude the people with the most direct stake in resource conditions from decision-making are weaker for that reason, regardless of how well they score on other design criteria.

This study is limited by the scope of the secondary and archival literature consulted, and in particular by the thinness of the post-independence documentary trail for kuhl enforcement noted in the Discussion. Primary research, including household surveys across multiple HP districts, longitudinal monitoring of specific kuhl and JFM committees, and field study of how devta custodianship is adapting under development pressure, would test and extend what has been argued here. What this paper can say with confidence, against all three of its stated objectives, is that these institutions are not relics in the process of being replaced by more modern arrangements. They remain the practical basis of resource governance for a large number of people in the Western Himalaya, their historical record is more fully documented than earlier accounts of this literature suggested, and the question of how well they are supported by law and policy is a real and current one.

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Exploring the influence of artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms on the development of teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement in contemporary digital learning contexts

Jyoti & Asha Yadav

ABSTRACT

Introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a tool to be used in online learning platforms has transformed the digital education environment radically and impacted the teaching process, the engagement between the learners, and the success of the students significantly. This paper explores how AI-enhanced platforms can influence teacher self-efficacy, which in this paper is defined as confidence on the part of educator to plan, perform and evaluate their teaching task and how this impacts student academic performance in online learning environments. The theoretical basis of this study is the theorizing of Bandura (1997) of self-efficacy and the research of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) on teacher efficacy. The study is dedicated to the adaptive learning systems with suggested paths, real-time feedback, and artificial intelligence analytics that assist teachers with the practical data to act and make decisions, to customize the learning process and looking after the multiple virtual classes.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Digital Learning Environment, Competence, Learning Outcome.*

Introduction

The quick growth of the digital technology, particularly, the Artificial Intelligence (AI), brought a change in the educational environment, resulting in the paradigmatic change of the modes of teaching and learning. Several current learning settings in the education field, especially the online learning systems, are increasingly dependent on AI technology, including machine learning algorithms, intelligent tutoring systems, natural language processing, and realtime analytics. Although a considerable number of studies have described how AI can be used to improve the learning outcomes of students, little has been even done concerning the effects that such online learning environments have on teachers themselves, particularly in terms of self- efficacy. According to

Bandura (1997), teacher self-efficacy is an individual belief held by a teacher regarding the ability to organize, plan, and participate in the instructive activities. Self-efficacy concerning AI-enhanced digital learning platforms is a major milestone towards determining the ability of a teacher to adjust to the constantly changing digital technology, operate in an online classroom, individualize the teaching process, and assess student learning.

With the shift in K-12 education systems in many countries to hybrid or completely online, teachers are expected to operate within the space of technologically mediated pedagogies. AI-enhanced platforms will offer teachers real-time student engagement, predictive performance analytics, automated grading and personalized content suggestions. These characteristics can help teachers to create a control over teaching and improve their practice in general. The opportunities and affordances of these innovations could eventually enhance the teacher self-efficacy through an actionable insight, remedy the high workload of the administration, and differentiate instruction (Holmes et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the relationship between the academic success and the application of AI is mediated by the self-belief and the ability of a teacher to apply facilitative technologies (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001). As such, it is opportune and significant to know how AI environments afford supports and affect teacher self-efficacy, self-beliefs and eventually instructional efficacy so as to offer a platform to support the emergence of responsive education technologies and professional learning.

Artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms have emerged as an important part of contemporary digital learning contexts because they combine technology, data analytics, adaptive content, automated feedback, and learner-centred instructional support. In recent years, online learning has moved beyond simple video lectures and digital notes to more interactive and intelligent systems that can identify learners' needs, suggest personalised learning paths, monitor progress, and provide instant academic support. These platforms use artificial intelligence tools such as adaptive assessment, chatbots, learning analytics, recommendation systems, automated grading, and personalised feedback to make the teaching-learning process more flexible and effective. In the present educational environment, where digital learning has become a regular part of schools, colleges, and higher education institutions, artificial intelligence has created new possibilities for improving both teaching practices and student outcomes. It helps teachers understand the learning behaviour of students, identify weak areas, plan remedial instruction, and use digital resources more effectively. Thus, artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms are not only changing the method of content delivery but also transforming the role of teachers from traditional information providers to facilitators, mentors, and digital learning guides.

The influence of these platforms becomes especially significant when studied in relation to teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement. Teacher self-efficacy refers to teachers' belief in their own ability to plan instruction, manage learning activities, motivate students, use technology, and improve students' academic performance. When teachers use artificial intelligence-supported online platforms, they may feel more confident because these systems provide useful data, teaching resources, automated support, and personalised learning insights. Such support can improve teachers' confidence in handling diverse learners, designing digital lessons, assessing student progress, and adopting innovative pedagogical strategies. At the same time, students may also benefit through individualised learning, timely feedback, interactive content, and better engagement, which may contribute to improved academic achievement. In contemporary digital learning contexts, the relationship between artificial intelligence-based learning platforms, teacher self-efficacy, and academic achievement is highly relevant because successful education now depends not only on access to technology but also on how effectively teachers and learners use it. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore how artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms contribute to strengthening teacher self-efficacy and improving academic achievement in modern educational settings.

Moreover, artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms support a more inclusive, responsive, and outcome-oriented learning environment by addressing the varied learning needs of students. In traditional classrooms, it is often difficult for teachers to provide individual attention to every learner due to differences in learning speed, academic ability, motivation, and access to resources. AI-based platforms help reduce this gap by offering personalised learning materials, continuous assessment, performance tracking, and immediate feedback. This enables teachers to make evidence-based instructional decisions and provide timely academic support to students who require additional help. As teachers become more familiar with these digital tools, their professional confidence, technological competence, and instructional effectiveness are likely to improve. Consequently, the integration of artificial intelligence in online learning can create a positive cycle where empowered teachers use technology more effectively, students receive better learning support, and academic achievement improves in contemporary digital education settings.

Literature review on the study

The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in online learning has brought in new opportunities in enhancing the teaching practice and student achievement. Some of the current studies and case studies reflect on the scope of the influence of AI-based platforms on the instructional practices, teacher effectiveness and empowerment, and educational outcomes. In this review, I will outline six significant case studies that are taking these factors into consideration according to different circumstances and establishments across the globe.

The article by Chen et al. on the topic of the AI-based Smart Classrooms in secondary schools in China was longitudinal. The teachers received an Access to an AI-based Smart Classroom platform where they could receive facial recognition and emotion detection to receive real-time learning analytics and a controlled AI-based learning environment. Teachers also stated that the confidence level was high as the AI tools gave specific feedback regarding the level of engagement, cognitive and emotional states of students. The information visualization of the platform helped to make an adjustment of the approaches of the teachers in real-time. This instructional practice was in line with a change of instructional practices as these practices shifted towards a more referential form of instructional practice that was in line with the needs of students. The authors summarized that AI enhanced classroom management and resulted in better academic outcomes due to a more customized teaching process.

The authors of the study by Holmes et al. assessed the use of IBM Watson Education AI tools in numerous K-12 schools within the U.S. Teachers were utilizing Watson expectant learning course and cognitive tutor modules. Results of a survey reported that teachers who had undertaken AI-based scoping pedagogical training had statistically significant high self-efficacy and instructional confidence. They attributed part of their growth to the adaptive learning suggestions and automatic student testing that was integrated into the platform that lessened their workload and made their instruction more accurate.

In India, the national platform DIKSHA contained modules of AI, which were applied to monitor learning process and suggest adaptive content. Narayan et al. considered a sample of teachers in government schools who were on the improved platform. The authors showed that AI-assisted information retrieved quick gap detection in the subject knowledge of learners and personal lesson plans by teachers, and led to an improvement in instructional competence. Had there not been the issues with digital training and infrastructure, the immediate promise of the program of DIKSHA could have been absolutely fulfilled which emphasizes the relevance of situational preparedness to form efficacy.

AI-based intelligent tutoring systems were incorporated in teacher training modules in one of the teacher-training universities in Finland. The pre-service teachers were able to interact with the AI tutors simulating student interaction, learning in the classroom, and planning their lesson, but the participants demonstrated their observed improvement in their instructional planning and even the state of preparedness. The application of AI in the experiential learning framework was also directly associated with the increase in the self-efficacy of teachers, especially regarding the ability to teach diverse virtual classrooms.

United Arab Emirates - AI-supported Blended Learning in Higher Education (Al-Harbi et al., 2022).

Theories interconnected with the AI-Driven online learning platform: an analysis

The pedagogical consequences of the AI-based online learning platforms cannot be comprehensively explained by applying it to a single theoretical approach in terms of educational psychology, instructional technology, and AI in education (AIED). To conduct this study, we summarize an interrelation of theories so that we could critically examine how an AI-enabled environment impact a teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement in an online learning environment.

Self-efficacy and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997)

This study is based on the theoretical premise of the Social Cognitive Theory of Bandura and, to be more precise, on its component of self-efficacy, i.e., the idea of the ability of an individual to carry out some specific action. Teacher self-efficacy in the educational setting has an influence on classroom management, choices in planning the instruction, and reactions to the student needs. The AI-assisted platforms influence the teacher self efficacy due to their ability to offer instructors actionable information that establish feedback loops and predictive analytics that make them feel more in control of, and thus own, the instruction. The automated grading tools, adaptive learning engines, etc. allow the instructor to have more time to mentor the student and less time doing office work, so the teacher feels more competent (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), and professionally confident.

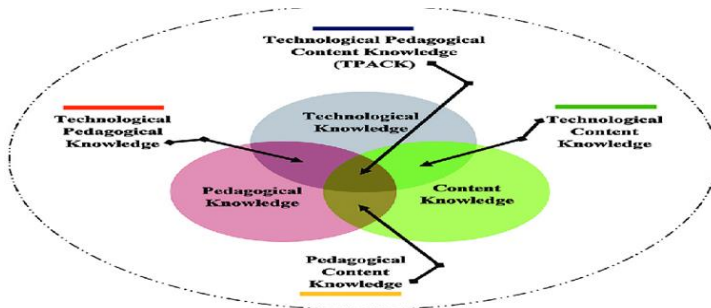


Source: <https://bandura-on-social-learning-theory-social-cognitive-theory/>

Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006)

The TPACK model is critical to comprehending how educators utilize technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge together. Furthermore, AI-infused learning platforms will require new knowledge that surpasses minor digital literacy. Educators will need to match their pedagogical intentions with the affordances of AI-sponsored tools including intelligent tutoring systems, personalized user content delivery, and real-time performance reporting. Thus, pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and technological knowledge (AI

system) establish the teacher's ability to engage with the AI tools in relevant ways. There is a strong relationship between higher TPACK knowledge and higher self-efficacy beliefs to teach and better student outcomes when employing classes in a learning environment endowed with AI.



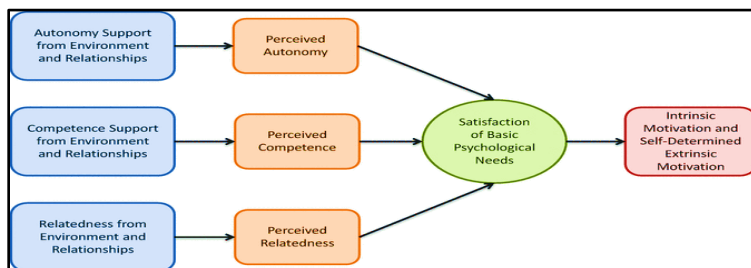
Source: www.researchgate.net/TPACK-Mishra-Koehler-2006_fig1_353880981

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988)

AI can relieve extraneous cognitive load by automating mundane tasks and minimizing decision-making for educators. For example, dashboards informed by AI - the dashboard can show a summary of student learning gaps, suggest appropriate interventions, and then display data in visually intuitive ways. Educators can channel more cognitive engagement into crucial tasks such as critical thinking, lesson planning, and adaptive instruction. As cognitive load decreases, many teachers are more efficacious when managing the innumerable complexities prevalent in a blended or fully online environment.

Self- Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

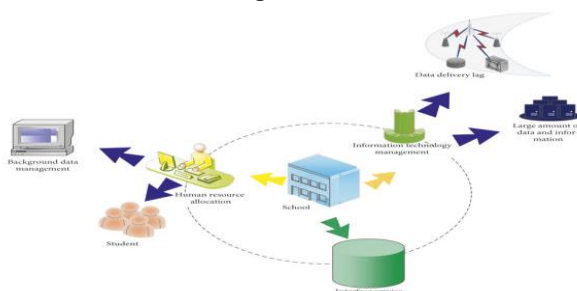
The theory of self-determination theorizes that motivation and psychological well-being derive from the satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. An AI-focused platform could fulfill all three needs through the autonomy to decide (e.g. choose to accept or reject AI-based recommendations or make changes in learning paths) and opportunities to develop instructional competence through evidence-informed feedback and enhanced connectedness through communication tools and collaborative features. Once these needs are fulfilled, teacher motivation and self-efficacy flourish, and teachers adopt more effective instructional strategies and better academic outcomes.



Source: www.barefootteflteacher.com/p/what-is-cognitive-load-theory

Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIED) Instances (Luckin et al., 2016)

The AIED frameworks emphasize the human-in-the-loop philosophy of design which enables AI tools to situate an educational practitioner as augmented, rather than replaced. Within this context, AI is a smart companion or resource to assist in instruction like grading, content editing, or feedback. By learning the logic and structure according to AI recommendations, teachers will be able to work alongside and not separate AI in order to create inclusive learning environments. The augmented teacher efficacy is based on the reinforcement of human cognition and machine intelligence.



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/architecture-diagram>

A combination of these theories proves that AI platforms are prompting teacher development when placed into learning enabling pedagogical ecosystems. An enhanced sense of self-efficacy is not an accidental by-product of exposure to technology, and, above all, they will be an outcome of a meaningful involvement with technology features which will relate to the cognitive, motivational and pedagogical needs of the teacher. Under these interrelated theories, this paper builds its insights on how AI-integrated platforms respond to form identity as a teacher, professional capability and achievements to the students.

The importance of the online learning platforms in the formation of the teacher self-efficacy and academic success in the contemporary circumstances of online learning.

The global environment is moving towards online and blended education, and digital technologies are changing at an extremely high rate, signifying an alternative approach to education. This has seen us experience a rise in interest in the online learning platforms and their capabilities in terms of pedagogical and effective application to the teachers. Online learning systems are complexed, they can be described as simple online learning management systems which include (Moodle and Google classroom) to multimodal online learning systems that are incorporated with built in analytics. Instructional planning, content delivery, and interaction with students could be based on these systems. Currently most studies on successful students using digital environments give minimal attention to attitudes that impact teacher behaviour and self-efficacy (Bandura 1972). In education, our level of self-efficacy affects not only how we manage the classroom, but also the quality of our instructions and our ability to exploit the huge nature of the digital technology (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001).

To react to such a situation, this paper shall offer an analysis of the relationships around online learning systems and their role in supporting teacher self-efficacy and the role self-efficacy plays in shaping academic achievement in the new and digital learning platform. To be more precise, this study aims at making its contribution to the discussion concerning teacher empowerment in online learning, focusing on the experiences of the teachers, technology flexibility, and the ability of instructors to employ technology in their practice. The chosen research questions will give empirical information about whether online learning platforms can foster student learning outcomes and teacher agency, resiliency and possible future professional development.

Comparative insights

The shift to the Internet-based learning system is already affecting the manner in which educators perceive themselves as able to teach, as well as learn, using technology, and how they grow professionally. Teacher-self-efficacy prior to the online learning platform was constructed largely in the ability of a teacher to provide a linear lesson in the classroom, whereby the classroom culture is based on the observation of peers and professional development. The teaching was typically textbook based and outlined at the margins of the teacher organization and assessment of the textbook content. Because of the lack of hold of student engagement via the prism of an online platform, real-time data informed decision making was usually absent, and lacked access to on demand professional resources. Therefore, professional learning was based solely on the institutional training cycles, and formal professional learning opportunities with presentation and informal learning opportunities through cooperation with their colleagues inevitably postponed the opportunities of responsive approach in teaching and learning and innovation (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001).

On the other hand, integration supported an exhilarating transformation to a data informed teaching and learning culture, customized teaching and learning and professional learning in stark contrast to newly accessed educational platforms of the online learning (Holmes et al., 2021). Online learning environment and Learning Management System (LMS) is now accessible to teachers as a means of technological improvement of professional learning. Indicatively, numerous LMS facilitate instructors to deploy such websites as Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft Teams and Canvas or Edmodo that are powered by AI to mark tasks automatically. There is real time analytics, adaptive learning modules, and auto graded system which can offer some form of efficiency that gives teachers confidence in their ability to instruct. Better still, due to the instant feedback of how the students are responding to their teaching, the educator is able to adjust their teaching to achieve the learning goals without necessarily waiting to the set deadlines-enhancing their sense of control over the learning process and independence in the instructional situation (self-efficacy, Bandura, 1997). In each of the raised examples, October 2023, which is mentioned by (Holmes et al., 2021), the newly integrated technological advances in education systems and teaching practice, in some cases, predict an increase in self-directed professional learning by 300% through, e.g. teacher resource libraries, video tutorials working with a global community of peers using AI or distance feedback systems or communities of practice.

Professional development too has shifted institutional episodic sessions to embedded microlearning that is constant and tends to be individualized either through platform recommendations or through AI-generated suggested resources. It was customary among the teachers to wait until the external professionals provided some development related to digital skills, but nowadays, the teachers take the initiative to enroll in MOOCs, discussion boards, webinars, and LMS-based professional communities, just to mention a few. Regarding the figures of professional learning democratized to educators through platforms like the Coursera for Educators or the Microsoft Education Center, we can observe the development of educator agency and self-directed professional learning, especially young or mid-career teachers, who are more digitally competent, and self-directed learners. The other transformation area is in the self direction and trial of the teaching. In the past, pacing and design options of teachers were limited by physical resources and schedule of time. In the online environment, a teacher can now choose the rate at which learners advance through their learning process, design their own asynchronous learning courses, and implement some of the new pedagogies of the flipped classroom and project based learning. This has not only created a creative environment in pedagogy, but has also changed the attitude of learning towards more of a constructivist environment by focusing on themselves as facilitators rather than exclusive dispensers of knowledge. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, according to Mishra and Koehler (2006), the shifts involve much interaction of pedagogy,

content and technology; a relationship where extends to greater self-efficacy of the teacher...

Conclusion

Online learning environments have radically reformed the model of practice among stakeholders in the education sector by modifying the teacher role and the facilitative role of the student learning. As indicated by the current research, it is possible to utilize the use of online environments worked out in Ontario within the framework of the government initiative into the constituents of learning self-efficacy and academic achievement in teachers significantly. Applying theories of Bandura theory of self-efficacy and TPACK to the interpretation of data of the role of online environments utilized by the Ontario research under consideration as the framework of interpreting data, and as the means of implementing in the practice, the research will have a positive impact on the formation of teacher confidence in the teaching. The information observed that most of the teachers indicated that online environments helped them become more data driven and reflective in making decisions on their practices. The analysis of data revealed the visible development and transformation of the model of teaching, as being a model of resources with a very rigid learning environment to the one, which is more dynamic and learner-centered. Before the digital platforms came into play, the education developmental model was pegged on institutional direct formalized training and the aforementioned development that was based on experience alone. The teachers are now enjoying the advantages of a post access and re-of new working opportunities in an integration of digital access? One of the disruptive elements in the digital integration of capacity is the real time data, quasi-automated feedback, and collaborative and individualized instruction. This has greatly transformed the model of development opportunities, has enhanced perceived competency of teachers and a consequent decrease in their work, as the structures are integrated into the environmental contexts of online classroom, and has also affected the exploration of shared leadership and positive student success. However, the given findings also point at the fact that the positive effect of online learning platforms on teacher self-efficacy is conditional on a variety of factors: the equal access to technology, the well-organized professional development, the institutional support, and the innovative culture.

In conclusion, artificial intelligence-enhanced online learning platforms have become a powerful support system for improving both teaching effectiveness and students' academic outcomes in modern digital learning environments. These platforms strengthen teacher self-efficacy by providing data-based insights, personalised teaching support, automated assessment, and flexible learning resources. At the same time, they help students learn according to their own pace, receive immediate feedback, and remain more actively engaged in the

learning process. Therefore, the effective use of AI-supported online learning platforms can create a more confident teaching community and a more achievement-oriented learning environment, making them highly relevant for the future of education.

Overall, the study highlights that the integration of artificial intelligence in online learning is not merely a technological advancement, but an educational transformation. When AI-based platforms are used effectively, they can reduce learning gaps, support differentiated instruction, improve teacher confidence, and enhance students' academic performance. Hence, educational institutions should promote proper training, digital readiness, and ethical use of AI tools so that both teachers and learners can benefit meaningfully from contemporary digital learning systems.

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Development policies and the political socialisation of tribal communities: evidence from Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh

Mahender Singh & Rattan Singh Chauhan

ABSTRACT

Development policies in tribal areas are increasingly not just tools of socio-economic change, but also tools of political socialisation and democratic incorporation. The present study is an attempt to explore the relationship between development policies and political socialisation of the tribal communities in Kinnaur District. The study examines the impact of welfare schemes, infrastructural development and local governance institutions on political awareness and democratic participation among the tribal population. The study used a mixed-method research design, which involved primary data collection using structured questionnaires, interviews and field interactions in the three administrative blocks of the district. Secondary data was gathered from government reports, census and scholarly literature. The relationship between developmental exposure and political awareness was analysed using statistical tools like percentage analysis, regression analysis and Chi-square tests. The results show that welfare interaction and developmental exposure have a significant positive impact on political awareness, institutional familiarity, and democratic participation. The incorporation of the developmental process is, however, unevenly distributed in the different welfare schemes and institutional fields. The study contends that development policies are now playing an important role in the process of democratic integration in tribal societies.

Keywords: *Development Policies, Political Socialisation, Tribal Communities, Democratic Incorporation, Welfare Schemes, Political Awareness.*

Introduction

Development and democratic transformation are a major issue in political sociology especially in the context of the incorporation of tribal societies into the post-colonial state (Xaxa, 2008). In India, development policies have functioned not merely as economic interventions but also as mechanisms through which the state expands its institutional presence and political legitimacy in geographically remote regions (Baviskar, 1995). State-led development has significantly changed the socio-cultural autonomy and relative

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isolation of tribal communities, and the nature of their relationship with formal political institutions. Therefore, development in tribal areas should be viewed as a socio-economic process as well as a political process that affects citizenship, awareness and state-society relations (Jayal, 2013).

This transformation is closely connected to the process of political socialisation in which people learn political values, beliefs and orientations necessary for democratic engagement. Classical scholars such as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) emphasised the role of institutions and socio-economic change in shaping civic culture and political participation, while (Easton, 1965) highlighted the importance of institutional interaction in developing political orientations. In the Indian context, Ghanshyam Shah (2004), Yogendra Yadav (2000) and Niraja Gopal Jayal (2013) have shown how the welfare expansion, decentralisation and state-led political inclusion of the marginal regions have shaped democratic participation in these areas. Development policies are now agents of political learning in tribal societies where political consciousness has been traditionally rooted in customary institutions and kinship networks, as they introduce communities to electoral processes, rights-based discourse, and governance systems.

This change is significant in the context of the tribal district of Kinnaur. Geographical isolation, rugged terrain of the Himalayas and a unique tribal identity have given Kinnaur a rich history of socio-economic transformation over the last few decades. The region has undergone a significant change in its developmental landscape due to the expansion of hydroelectric projects, road connectivity under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), educational institutions, communication networks, and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Sen et al., 2024). The development of the horticulture economy, especially the cultivation of apples, has led to greater interaction between local communities and formal governance structures, as has the rise in literacy levels and institutional access (Gupta et al., 2021). These developments have also increased the opportunities for political participation and democratic engagement in the region.

In spite of these changes, there is a key research question that remains. Previous studies on tribal societies by scholars like Virginius Xaxa, Andre Beteille and Walter Fernandes have explored in detail the questions of tribal identity, socio-economic deprivation, displacement and state intervention. But little empirical work has been done to understand the impact of development policies on political socialisation and democratic awareness in the tribal areas, especially in the Himalayan context. The main focus of this study is to see if developmental interventions in tribal areas create a greater political awareness and democratic engagement beyond economic outcomes.

In this context, the present study deals with the correlation between development policies and political socialisation in Kinnaur district. The study examines the impact of developmental intervention (in the form of infrastructure, education, welfare schemes, and local governance institutions) on political awareness and democratic participation among tribal communities, conceptualising these interventions as independent variables. The paper, based on primary field data, suggests that development policies in Kinnaur are not only tools of socio-economic change but also significant mechanisms of political inclusion and democratic socialisation in the tribal region.

Review of literature

The relationship between socio-economic development and political transformation has long been a subject of theoretical contestation. Classical modernisation theorists, such as Almond and Verba (1963) and Inkeles and Smith (1974), posited a linear correlation where institutional expansion and literacy inevitably foster a "civic culture" and heightened political participation. In this context, development is a major instrument of political socialisation that transforms individuals from parochial to participant orientations. But critical scholars have questioned this "top-down" modernization thesis, suggesting that developmental interventions in the periphery can result in "asymmetric integration," in which political awareness grows, but institutional legitimacy is still fragile because of historical marginalisation.

In the Indian context, the discourse has shifted from general modernisation to the nuances of democratic inclusion. Scholars such as Yogendra Yadav (2000) have pointed to a "second democratic upsurge", in which the political participation of socially marginal groups has grown, even as the state has failed to reach them in its developmental efforts. While Niraja Gopal Jayal (2001) highlights how the expansion of welfare and decentralisation has created new spaces for "active citizenship," others, such as Partha Chatterjee (2004), suggest that for marginal populations, the state is experienced primarily through "political society" a site of negotiation for resources rather than a formal democratic engagement. This creates a conceptual tension regarding whether development fosters genuine democratic socialisation or merely promotes a transactional relationship with the state. The traditional power institutions (TPIs) also play significant role in percolating political information into the marginal corners of Kinnaur society, thus acting as socialisation agents (See Thakur et. al. 2025)

Literature specifically addressing tribal societies reflects a similar divide. Virginius Xaxa (1999) and Andre Beteille (1991) have noted that the modernisation process has significantly altered the social hierarchy of the tribes and the relationship between the state and the tribes. But there is a major controversy about the nature of this change. Critical tribal scholarship (e.g.,

Fernandes, 2007; Guha, 2007) tends to focus on the displacement and exclusion aspects of state-led development, which has the effect of undermining indigenous power structure without offering any viable democratic alternative. In contrast, recent empirical research on Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and welfare politics (e.g., Manor, 2010; Maiorano, 2014) indicates that the implementation of rural development initiatives such as MGNREGA and PMGSY has been a "political laboratory" for tribal citizens to learn how to manoeuvre through bureaucracy, to voice their rights, and to engage in electoral bargaining.

The mainstream tribal divide is the focus of the general Indian discussion, but scholarship on Himachal Pradesh offers a more complex perspective on the penetration of democracy. T.S. Negi (1972) provided early evidence of infrastructural and administrative expansion in regions like Kinnaur. Likewise, Mini Pathak Dogra contended that the tribal politics in HP is predominantly integrationist in nature with relatively high level of political awareness, electoral participation and peaceful democratic incorporation. Although there is a growing body of literature on tribal development and political participation, there is not much empirical research that examines the impact of specific developmental interventions like education, welfare delivery, infrastructural connectivity, and digital access on political socialisation and democratic awareness at the micro level. Although there is a body of literature on tribal development and political participation in the Himalayan tribal belt, there has been little empirical research that focuses on the impact of certain developmental interventions like education, welfare delivery, infrastructural connectivity, and digital access on political socialisation and democratic awareness at the micro level. The main gap in the present study is that there is no such empirical analysis in the context of tribal Kinnaur.

Theoretical framework

The present study is primarily grounded in the theory of political socialisation, which explains how individuals develop political values, attitudes and orientations through interaction with political and social institutions. Theories of democratic behaviour and political participation, like those of David Easton, Gabriel Almond, and Sidney Verba, have focused on the institutions that continuously influence democratic behaviour and participation, including schools, media, governance systems, and state agencies. Developmental interventions are becoming significant agents of political socialisation in tribal societies, where political life was traditionally shaped by customary institutions and kinship networks. This study contends that the repeated encounters with welfare institutions, educational institutions, local governance institutions, and state institutions create institutional familiarity, political awareness, and democratic engagement among the citizens of the tribe.

The study is also based on modernisation perspectives that link socio-economic development with political participation and democratic change. Samuel P. Huntington and Lucian Pye among others noted that infrastructural development, literacy, communication, and institutional development are factors that foster political consciousness and civic participation. The framework also acknowledges, however, that there can be unevenness in developmental incorporation as a result of differences in institutional access, geographical isolation, and socio-economic inequalities. In the Indian context, Partha Chatterjee and Niraja Gopal Jayal showed that the relationship between citizens and the state is now mediated by welfare policies and decentralised governance, especially in the case of socially marginal communities. Development is therefore considered not only as an economic process but also as a means to increase democratic interaction and political incorporation.

Based on these perspectives, the study conceptualises development policies as independent variables influencing processes of political socialisation in tribal regions. Infrastructural development, educational access, welfare schemes, communication facilities, and Panchayati Raj Institutions are treated as major developmental interventions shaping political awareness and democratic participation among tribal communities in Kinnaur District. Within this framework, political socialisation is understood as the process through which tribal citizens acquire democratic orientations and institutional awareness, while political awareness and participation are treated as cognitive and behavioural outcomes of this process. The framework therefore enables an examination of development not merely as socio-economic change, but as an important mechanism of democratic incorporation and political consciousness in tribal societies.

Research questions and hypotheses

The present study is an attempt to explore the relationship between development policies and political socialisation of the tribal communities of Kinnaur District. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of political socialisation, democratic incorporation and welfare-state interaction to examine the impact of developmental exposure on political awareness and democratic participation among the tribal population.

The following research questions are used to guide the study:

1. How do development policies influence political awareness and democratic engagement among tribal communities in Kinnaur?
2. Does welfare based institutional interaction contribute to greater democratic familiarity and political socialisation in tribal areas?

Based on the theoretical framework and empirical orientation of the study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₁: Greater exposure to development policies significantly increases political awareness among tribal respondents.

H₂: Participation in welfare schemes involving regular institutional interaction is positively associated with awareness of democratic institutions and elected representatives.

H₃: Political socialisation through development remains uneven due to variations in welfare access and institutional engagement.

Methodology

The present study is of mixed method type in which quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to study the relationship between development policies and political socialisation among the tribal communities of Kinnaur District. The study is descriptive and analytical, examining the impact of welfare schemes, infrastructural development, education and local governance institutions on political awareness and democratic participation.

The study was carried out in all three administrative blocks of Kinnaur district namely Pooh, Kalpa and Nichar. A multi-stage sampling technique was used and primary data obtained from 382 respondents using structured questionnaires and field interactions. Secondary data were collected from Census reports, government publications, reports of the Election Commission, books, journals, and policy documents on tribal development and political participation. The study conceptualises development policies as independent variables that affect political socialisation among tribal communities. Infrastructural development, access to education, welfare schemes, communication facilities and Panchayati Raj Institutions were treated as major developmental variables and political awareness, knowledge of elected representatives, and democratic participation as indicators of political socialisation. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (regression analysis, independent sample t-test, Chi-square test) were used to analyse the collected data. The data were analyzed statistically using SPSS software.

Development and political socialisation in Kinnaur

It is essential to know the socio-economic context of the respondents while analysing the relationship between development policies and political socialisation in the tribal areas. Access to developmental schemes, interaction with governance institutions and political awareness is significantly affected by education, occupation, income and social status. The socio-economic profile of respondents is of great importance for the empirical understanding of the pattern of democratic participation and state-society interaction in the context of Kinnaur District. Table 1 shows the major socio-economic characteristics of the respondents who were included in the study.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

S.No.	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	193	50.5
		Female	189	49.5
		18–29	83	21.7
2	Age	30–45	170	44.5
		46–60	96	25.1
		61+	33	8.6
3	Education	No formal education	20	5.2
		Primary (1–5)	31	8.1
		Middle (6–8)	45	11.8
		Secondary (9–10)	48	12.6
		Higher Secondary (11–12)	91	23.8
		Graduate	104	27.2
		Postgraduate & above	43	11.3
		Agriculture/Horticulture	236	61.8
		Livestock rearing	124	32.5
		Government service	38	9.9
4	Occupation	Private job/Business	69	18.1
		Tourism/Hospitality	20	5.2
		Daily wage labour	26	6.8
		Unemployed	54	14.1
		Homemaker	96	25.1
		Other	12	3.1
		Less than 10,000	85	22.3
		10,000–20,000	104	27.2
		20,000–40,000	85	22.3
		40,000–60,000	47	12.3
5	Monthly Income (INR)	More than 60,000	42	11
		Prefer not to say	19	5
6	Caste/Tribal Status	ST	373	97.6
		SC	9	2.4

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

The socio-economic composition of the respondents is indicative of the changing socio-economic structure of the tribal society in Kinnaur District. Gender distribution is almost even, with a good representation of both male and female respondents. The majority of respondents are in the economically active age group of 30-45 years (44.5 per cent), followed by those in the age group of 46-60 (25.1 per cent), which means that the study reflects the perceptions of people who are actively involved in economic activities, local governance and developmental processes. The high percentage of Scheduled Tribe respondents (97.6 per cent) also reinforces the tribal nature of the study area and the relevance of the analysis in the context of tribal political change. The educational profile also shows a progressive trend from isolation to higher education levels and social mobility. A very small percentage of the respondents indicated that they had no formal education (5.2 per cent), while a significant number had higher secondary, graduate and post-graduate qualifications, which is indicative of the growing extent of the educational infrastructure and developmental programmes in the district.

The occupational and income situation suggests that the economy remains predominantly agrarian-horticultural and there is limited occupational diversification. Most of the respondents (61.8 per cent) are engaged in agriculture and horticulture, indicating the importance of economic activities related to apple in Kinnaur. Meanwhile, the decline in government employment, tourism and private sector work indicates that opportunities outside of agriculture are still constrained despite continued developmental interventions. Income distribution also reveals that a significant share of the respondents is in the lower- and middle-income brackets, indicating limited economic development and uneven progress. These socio-economic factors have a significant impact on the pattern of state interaction, developmental exposure, political awareness and political participation of the tribal communities of Kinnaur.

The development exposure and political awareness.

Political awareness is a key aspect of political socialisation in tribal societies, and it is linked to developmental interventions. In areas like Kinnaur District where the state has historically been weak because of geographical isolation, development policies are increasingly becoming a way of citizens engaging with governance institutions, getting political information, and engaging in democratic processes. Tables 1.2 and 1.3 explore the level of political awareness and developmental exposure among the respondents in the study area.

Table 1.2: Descriptive analysis of political awareness among respondents

S.No.	Statements	Mean	SD	Key Response Category (Highest %)	Percentage (%)
1	Awareness about government development policies/programs	2.98	0.827	Moderately informed	41.1
2	Confidence in approaching local government officials	3.14	0.993	Confident	44
3	Knowledge of eligible development schemes	1.92	0.608	Yes – some schemes	74.3
4	Increase in political interest due to development policies	3.42	0.85	Increase interest	58.4
5	Development schemes increase political awareness in community	3.88	0.642	Agree	84
6	Youth political awareness due to development outreach	3.99	0.627	Agree	79.6

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

Table 1.3: Development-Related Participation and Awareness among Respondents

S.No.	Statements	Mean	SD	Key Response Category (Highest %)	Percentage (%)
1	Participation in local meetings discussing development issues	3.23	0.863	Often (Monthly)	42.7
2	Participation in trainings/awareness programs on development schemes	1.75	0.469	No	71.7
3	Usefulness of trainings in understanding rights and entitlements	4.98	1.423	Not applicable	56.3
4	Discussion of political/development issues with family/neighbours	3.06	0.713	Sometimes	63.9
5	Implementation of development projects in village	1.91	0.593	Yes – one or two projects	74.3
6	Improvement in household economic situation due to development	3.49	0.838	Improved greatly	57.9

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

The findings indicate that respondents have moderate to high political awareness, especially in the context of the role of development in political involvement. There was a significant number of respondents who said they were moderately informed about government development policies and felt confident in approaching local government officials. Likewise, a large number of respondents recognized that development policies had raised the political interest of the community and promoted political awareness among youth. The results indicate that developmental interventions are not only economic and welfare-driven processes, but also significant avenues of political learning and democratic engagement. Tribal communities have become more familiar with institutional structures, such as welfare schemes, local governance institutions and developmental outreach, and have grown more politically aware. The results also show some weaknesses, however. Some schemes were known to the respondents but awareness was partial and not complete and participation in formal training or awareness programmes related to development schemes was relatively limited. This means that although development policies have improved political exposure, institutional arrangements for more in-depth political education and continued democratic engagement are not uniform.

Through regression analysis, the overall association between development exposure and political awareness is further supported. The results reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between development exposure and political awareness ($B = .272$, $\beta = .329$, $p < .001$), which means that higher the development exposure, higher the political awareness among the respondents. The results indicate that the model is moderately explanatory ($R^2 = .108$) and that developmental exposure is a valid predictor of democratic awareness among the tribal population. Development has also become more entrenched in the daily political and social life of the district, as evidenced by regular attendance at local meetings, discussions about developmental issues in families and neighbourhoods and perceptions of economic improvement. The results thus support the hypothesis H1 and corroborate the general argument that development policies serve as significant agents of political socialisation, thus increasing the citizens' interaction with the governance institutions and improving the political awareness of tribal Kinnaur.

Welfare schemes and uneven political awareness

Patterns of participation in welfare schemes offer valuable clues to the differential developmental incorporation of tribal societies. In regions such as Kinnaur District, welfare programmes constitute one of the primary channels through which citizens interact with governance institutions and experience the presence of the state. But participation across schemes is not uniform, and variations in access and institutional engagement significantly shape political awareness and democratic interaction. Tables 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6 look at the

participation in government schemes, knowledge of local representatives and awareness of development schemes.

Table 1.4: Participation in government schemes

S.No.	Government Schemes	Number of Respondents (N)	Percentage of Cases (%)
1	MGNREGA (Employment Guarantee Scheme)	313	84.6
2	Public Distribution System (PDS)	317	85.7
3	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)	57	15.4
4	Rural Electrification Schemes	55	14.9
5	Road/Bridge Construction Assistance	46	12.4
6	Water Supply and Sanitation (Swachh Bharat)	73	19.7
7	Skill Development / Training	8	2.2
8	Social Pension / Old Age Schemes	142	38.4
9	Health Schemes (Ayushman Bharat etc.)	159	43.0
10	Agricultural and Horticulture Subsidy / Support	132	35.7

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

Table 1.5: Level of Awareness Regarding Local Representatives

S.No.	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Yes – Named Person	349	91.4
2	Yes, but cannot name	27	7.1
3	No	6	1.6
Total		382	100

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

Mean = 1.10 SD = 0.351

Table 1.6: Awareness of Government Schemes

S.No.	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Yes – most schemes	71	18.6
2	Yes – some schemes	284	74.3
3	No	12	3.1
4	Don't know	15	3.9
Total		382	100.0

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).

Mean = 1.92 SD = 0.608

The findings reveal that the participation is mostly in the major welfare programmes like PDS (85.7 per cent) and MGNREGA (84.6 per cent), which reflects the wide institutional coverage of the district. There is moderate participation in health, pension and agricultural/horticultural support schemes while comparatively low participation in infrastructure and capacity-building schemes like PMAY, rural electrification, road assistance and skill development programmes. Low participation in skill development programs is especially indicative of low institutional penetration in the field of long-term employment diversification and capacity building. The results indicate that the exposure to welfare in tribal Kinnaur is still skewed and confined to subsistence-based welfare schemes. Meanwhile, there is a high degree of local political awareness, with most respondents correctly identifying their elected representatives and reporting that they knew of at least some government schemes. This suggests that the political awareness of the study area is not only influenced by formal political education, but also by the regular contact with welfare institutions and local governance processes.

Independent sample t-test analysis is also used to support the relationship between welfare participation and political awareness. The beneficiaries of the schemes which are accessed frequently like PDS, Swachh Bharat, social pension schemes, agricultural or horticultural support schemes showed comparatively higher political awareness than the non-beneficiaries. Schemes with lower institutional outreach such as PMAY, rural electrification and skill development programmes did not exhibit any statistically significant differences in awareness levels. The results indicate that the political impact of development is more related to the frequency and continuity of citizens' interactions with governance institutions than to the presence of welfare schemes. Familiarity with and awareness of institutions is stronger when programmes involve regular administrative engagement. The results thus partially confirm H3 and indicate that political socialisation in the context of development in the tribal Kinnaur is still uneven and institutionally differentiated.

Democratic awareness and institutional familiarity

Welfare participation and democratic awareness are especially relevant in the tribal areas where developmental institutions are the main link between citizens and the state. Welfare schemes can also be a buffer between tribal communities and governance in geographically distant regions like Kinnaur District. Thus, involvement in development programmes can help to foster material welfare as well as institutional familiarity, political awareness and democratic engagement. To explore this relationship, the study used the Chi-square test to analyse the association between participation in government schemes and respondents' awareness of local democratic representatives such as Sarpanch, MLA and MP.

Table 1.7: Association between Participation in Government Schemes and Democratic Awareness (Chi-Square Test)

S.No.	Governments Schemes	Chi-square Value	Df	(p-value)	Association Status
1	MGNREGA (Employment Guarantee Scheme)	14.807	2	0.001*	Significant Association
2	Public Distribution System (PDS)	16.429	2	0.000*	Significant Association
3	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)	0.319	2	0.853	No Significant Association
4	Rural Electrification / UDAY / Local Power Schemes	0.272	2	0.873	No Significant Association
5	Road/Bridge Construction Assistance	0.139	2	0.933	No Significant Association
6	Water Supply and Sanitation (Swachh Bharat)	2.266	2	0.322	No Significant Association
7	Skill Development / Training	1.263	2	0.532	No Significant Association
8	Social Pension / Old Age Schemes	1.064	2	0.588	No Significant Association
9	Health Schemes (Ayushman Bharat etc.)	3.763	2	0.152	No Significant Association
10	Agricultural and Horticulture Subsidy / Support	4.103	2	0.129	No Significant Association

Note. Data compiled from primary survey conducted by the researcher (2026).
Significant at 5 per cent level.

The results show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the respondents' democratic awareness and their knowledge of elected representatives and their participation in welfare schemes like MGNREGA and PDS. The significance values of MGNREGA ($p = 0.001$) and PDS ($p = 0.000$) are still below 0.05, suggesting that beneficiaries of these schemes have comparatively higher levels of political awareness. The frequency of contact with Panchayati Raj Institutions, village level officials, administrative processes and grievance systems in these programmes seems to enhance the familiarity of institutions and democratic awareness among the beneficiaries. Schemes like PMAY, rural electrification, road construction assistance, skill development schemes, and health schemes, on the other hand, did not show any statistically significant relationship with democratic awareness. These programmes are characterized by less or occasional engagement with governance institutions and thus have less impact on political socialisation.

The results indicate that developmental exposure is not enough to create democratic awareness, but rather the frequency and continuity of institutional interaction is what matters for the impact of welfare programmes on political socialisation. Frequent interactions with local governance structures increase beneficiaries' familiarity with administrative procedures, elected representatives, and institutional processes. Political awareness in the tribal area of Kinnaur is thus more a product of regular contact with welfare institutions and local governance systems than formal civic education. The results confirm H2 and strengthen the thesis that development policies serve as a means of economic support as well as a significant means of political learning, democratic incorporation and integration of state society.

Limits of developmental incorporation.

The results of the study confirm H1 as it shows that there is a positive correlation between developmental exposure and political awareness among the tribal respondents of Kinnaur District. The results of regression analysis showed that there is a significant increase in political awareness and institutional familiarity due to the interaction of the developmental processes. Those who were more exposed to the welfare schemes, local governance structures, and developmental outreach showed greater political interest and awareness of democratic institutions. The results indicate that development policies are not only economic intervention tools, but also significant agents of political socialisation, increasing citizens' contact with the state and governance bodies.

The study also confirms H2, as it demonstrates that welfare schemes with frequent institutional contact have a strong impact on democratic awareness and familiarity with elected representatives. Schemes like MGNREGA and PDS showed statistically significant links with awareness of local political representatives and governance structures. The regular interaction with the PRI, village-level officials, administrative processes, and welfare delivery systems seems to enhance the familiarity of the beneficiaries with democracy. The results show that political socialisation in tribal Kinnaur is mainly through the routine interaction with welfare institutions and not through formal civic education or ideological mobilisation.

The results also confirm H3, showing that political socialisation via development is not uniform and institutionally differentiated. Sustained administrative engagement resulted in higher political awareness while a few developmental schemes like skill development programmes, PMAY and infrastructure related schemes showed low participation and low democratic impact. The unequal access to information, different institutional outreach and low participation in awareness and training programmes suggest that developmental incorporation is still partial and selective. The study thus challenges the classical modernization assumptions, which suggest that

democratic incorporation is contingent on development, and argues that it is more dependent on the frequency, continuity and accessibility of institutional interaction. The overall results show that the development in tribal Kinnaur has increased the interaction of the grassroots with the institutional bodies of governance and enhanced political awareness, albeit in a stratified and uneven manner across institutional domains.

Discussion

The results of the study support H1 as it has shown that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between developmental exposure and political awareness among the tribal respondents of Kinnaur District. People have become more familiar with institutions and more aware of democracy through interaction with welfare schemes, local governance institutions and developmental processes. It is recommended that development policies serve as not only as tools of economic intervention, but also as significant agents of political socialisation, linking tribal citizens to governance structures and the democratic state.

The results also confirm H2, as they indicate that the more frequent institutional contact in the context of welfare schemes has a significant positive effect on democratic familiarity and awareness of elected representatives. There was a significant association between participation in schemes like MGNREGA and PDS with awareness about local political representatives and governance institutions. Frequent interaction with Panchayati Raj Institutions, local officials and administrative processes seems to foster political socialisation in the mundane process of providing welfare services, rather than through formal political education or ideological mobilisation.

The study also confirms H3 by showing that political socialisation through development continues to be selective and uneven in the context of welfare schemes and institutional contexts. Schemes with ongoing administrative engagement created greater political awareness than schemes with limited outreach or sporadic engagement, like skill development and infrastructure related schemes. The uneven participation in awareness and training programmes and the lack of knowledge of developmental entitlements also suggest that democratic incorporation is partial and stratified. The results thus contradict the classical modernization assumptions that the democratic impact of development relies on the development itself. The results therefore contradict the classical modernization assumptions that the democratic impact of development relies on the development itself, but rather on the continuity, accessibility and intensity of institutional interaction. Overall, the study reveals that the welfare institutions are becoming important tools of political consciousness, democratic engagement and state-society relations among the tribal people of Kinnaur District.

Conclusion

The study explored the relationship between development policies and political socialisation of the tribal communities of District Kinnaur and how developmental exposure affects political awareness, democratic participation and familiarity with institutions. The results show that development in tribal areas is not only economic but also a process of political incorporation and democratic interaction. The district has seen an increase in the interaction between citizens and state institutions through welfare schemes, infrastructural development, educational outreach and local governance engagement, which has enhanced political awareness and participation among the citizens.

The empirical results show that there is a positive correlation between developmental exposure and political awareness. Those who had more contact with development programmes were more likely to have a high level of political interest, confidence in approaching local officials and knowledge of governance structures. The regression analysis also showed that developmental exposure has a statistically significant effect on political awareness, thus reinforcing the overall theoretical claim that development policies are political socialisation agents in tribal societies. Likewise, the Chi-square results show that schemes that involve regular institutional interaction, especially MGNREGA and PDS, play a significant role in awareness about local political representatives and democratic institutions.

The study also reveals the differential and selective nature of developmental incorporation. The penetration of participation in schemes is very uneven, with welfare schemes having much higher penetration than skill development, awareness generation and capacity building schemes. Respondents were generally aware of government schemes and elected representatives, but this awareness was not always complete. The results thus indicate that the process of political socialisation through development is not only dependent on the expansion of development but also on the frequency, continuity, and visibility of institutional interaction. Programmes that involve regular interaction with governance institutions seem to be more effective in fostering democratic awareness than schemes with occasional or one-off benefits.

The study adds to the larger conversation on tribal politics and democratic change by breaking away from the traditional narratives of deprivation and isolation. The findings show that developmental processes are increasingly influencing political consciousness, institutional familiarity and democratic participation in tribal Kinnaur, rather than being seen as mere recipients of welfare. But the continued disparities in participation and lack of awareness also suggest that developmental integration is not complete. Increasing awareness campaigns, enhancing participatory outreach and increasing institutional accessibility are therefore crucial to deepen democratic engagement in tribal

regions. In general, the study suggests that development policies in Kinnaur have become significant tools of political socialisation, and have been increasingly incorporating tribal communities into the larger democratic structure of the Indian state.

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Motif of revenge in select novels by Indian women writers

Anju Jagpal

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological and narrative architecture of the motif of revenge within contemporary South Asian fiction, focusing specifically on Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*, and Anita Rau Badami's *Tell It to the Trees*. While classical scriptures and Western literary tragedies frequently frame vengeance as a highly masculine enterprise of direct warfare or public restoration of honor, this study psychoanalyzes how marginalized female protagonists' appropriate personal agency under oppressive patriarchal constraints. Operating outside the boundaries of formal legal frameworks that fail to address deep emotional and psychological trauma, these characters deploy varied strategies—ranging from domestic subversion and systemic manipulation to impulsive physical retribution. By tracing their paths from victimization to structural defiance, the paper interrogates the binary of the victim and the villain, examining the psychological satisfaction and destabilizing moral consequences inherent in the pursuit of personal justice.

Keywords: *Revenge motif, Indian women writers, psychological agency, patriarchy, trauma, poetic just.*

“The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right.” This profound lament from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene 5) encapsulates the timeless psychological burden of retribution. Revenge as a motif is as primeval and primitive as man on this planet. The intent to set some transgression right and reclaim one's peace of mind, self-respect, personal and social honor, and motive to move on in life is a common and some-what defensible wish, and has been recorded in historical and literary texts from a long past. Deeply associated with the emotions of fury, detestation and hostility, the idea and desire of revenge arise as a psychological and emotional drive in a person who believes that s/he has been a victim of some uninvited and undeserved behavior and treatment by others, causing a long- lasting damage to the person's physical, mental, emotional and social health. Though it is an all-consuming desire that keeps the avenger singeing and leaves a loop of hatred and destruction in the trail, yet a sense of justice and retribution, emotional equilibrium and psychological calm is attained only after seeking revenge. Michael E. McCullough observes that the craving for revenge is wired into

every neurologically healthy human being, and is therefore an entirely normal impulse rather than an aberration. (McCullough, 2008) On the other hand, there are thinkers, philosophers and writers like Mahatma Gandhi who emphasizing the value of non-violence and forgiveness, warn that “an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.” Recognized for his revenge tragedies, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare also equates mercy to a godly quality that elevates humanity to divinity as ‘It is an attribute to god himself’. Kerrigan, however, understands Revengers as “questers after psychic balance as well as ethical equivalence”, tallying up their losses like careful accountants and repaying the suffering they have experienced in kind (Kerrigan, 1996) Western classical as well as modern Literature is replete with writings with the motif of revenge and a lot of research and critical work has already been done on this topic. Almost all the established religions of the world prioritize forgiveness and mercy over revenge, yet there are characters in the scriptures and classical literature who have sought revenge as strategic tool of poetic justice and self-preservation.

The present paper, however, is a limited attempt to trace and psycho-analyze certain acts of revenge taken by women characters as depicted by Indian women writers and intends to study *Ladies Coupe* (Nair, 2001), *One Amazing Thing* (Divakaruni, 2010) and *Tell It to the Trees* (Badami, 2011). Since the paper would try to locate women characters appropriating their own agency to settle scores with their offenders in the Indian context, it would be apt to refer to some of the heroic women such as Amba and Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* and Shurpanakha from the *Ramayana*, whose revenge not only proved to be monumental but also molded the course of narrative of our scriptures.

Daughter of Kashya, the King of Kashi, Amba feels slighted and rejected by Bhishma who had abducted her along with her two sisters Ambika and Ambalika during her *swayamvara* for his half-brother Vichitravirya. Upon knowing Amba’s love for King Shalva, she is released from the captivity to marry the man of her own choice, who discards her further as she has been won by another man. Left stranded, Amba returns to Bhishma and pleads with him to accept her in marriage to vindicate her honor. Since Bhishma is under the oath of celibacy, he cannot fulfill her desire and, thus, begins the tale of her never-ending hatred and austere penances to avenge her honor and reclaim her sense of justice as even her Guru Parashuram could not defeat Bhishma in a twenty-three-day duel. She takes rebirth in King Drupad’s family as Shikhandi to play her part in the annihilation of the mighty and invincible warrior Bhishma, her sinner, during the 18-day Kurukshetra War which itself was avowed, ignited and propelled by another woman character, Draupadi after her public humiliation in the court of the Kauravas during the infamous game of dice. She avows retribution to all the perpetrators of her dishonor and silent observers of her shame and disgrace, and pledges that she would not tie her hair till she washes them with Dushasan’s

blood since it was he who had dragged her by her hair to the court of Kauravas to disrobe her publicly. In addition to countless other reasons, her fury and grit to avenge the wrongs and sins committed against her, expedite the momentum of the great war. Though she herself has to face tremendously brutal loss of her five sons and mourn for them eternally, the sense of justice is restored not only for her but for all the generations to come who derives lessons of life from the scriptures.

Shurpanakha takes revenge upon Ram and Lakshman inciting her brother Ravana's greed and lust through her portrayal of Sita's matchless beauty and coaxes him to abduct her which would damage beyond repair the reputation and honour of Ram and the Raghuvanshi Clan. During their exile, she happens to see the two brothers and is charmed by their grace and valor. Her marriage proposal is rejected by them and in an attempt to attack Sita, she goes overboard and gets her nose chopped by Lakshman. This dishonoring would definitely entail revenge and she goes to her brothers Khara and Dushan who get killed along with their armies by the two brothers. Finally, she goes to Lanka to seek revenge through her all-mighty brother Ravana. The popular retellings of the *Ramayana*, however, seek and attest that the actual motive of revenge was plotted against Ravana himself who had killed her secretly wedded husband Vidyutjihva who was from a rival clan. Knowing full well the limitations of her own agency to take revenge upon her unconquerable brother, she intentionally manipulates Ram and Lakshman into a war with Ravana, leading to the latter's total annihilation. The event is detailed in the Uttara Kand, Sarga 23 of the *Valmiki Ramayana*.

In the epics, men ordinarily settle their scores on the open battlefield, whereas women, hemmed in by social constraints, are compelled to work obliquely: they voice their anger and press their demand for retribution through weeping and public mourning, through curses, through the sacrifice or endangering of their own bodies, through threats of self-destruction, and only in the rarest cases through arms. (Anil & Kishore, 2026) Seen in this light, lamentation is not merely the helpless overflow of sorrow; it becomes a calculated and disruptive instrument of protest, by which the powerless turn their very grief into a public weapon that unsettles authority, presses the claim of justice and goads others towards retribution. All the three women characters discussed above are by no means sidelined as understood in common parlance, yet their marginalization in the context of their own socio-political setting speaks volumes about the embedded and inherent gender biases cutting across all the echelons of society. All of them initially resort to public grieving, lamentation and curses to keep their injured past and mortifications alive, expressing their grievances and directing the action of revenge, it is Amba as Shikhandi who takes up weapons directly against Bhishma to avenge her honour. J. A. John pertinently remarks that the very qualities for which one half of humanity has been branded the

‘weaker sex’ prove, in the fullness of time, to be the instruments of women’s empowerment (John, 2020).

Woman as nurturer and preserver is mostly perceived as endowed with compassion, forgiveness, perseverance and a sense of sacrifice, and “...revenge is frequently depicted as a man’s job: women incite and men act, performing the killings that establish their masculinity and protect their honour. Yet, while conceptualized as a quintessential masculine activity, revenge simultaneously unleashes the female Furies and the violent, ‘feminine’ emotions which threaten a man’s reason and self-control. (Dawson & McHardy, 2018) In the case of both Draupadi and Shurpanakha, it is the women who keep the motif of revenge enflamed in the hearts of their men and the dutybound men go to war to avenge their honor. “...scholars are divided as to whether female avengers should be interpreted as honorary men, heroes in their own right, monstrous inversions of gender norms, or conduits through which male subjectivity is formed” (Dawson & McHardy, 2016).

Another significant question that needs to be addressed is whether law completely fails to deliver a sense of justice and to the revenger or the nature of offence is such that it falls beyond the overview of state and law. In patriarchal societies where women find themselves stifled by the gender-biased legal and social structures that do not address their psychological and emotional hurt and traumas, they take recourse to their personal revenge to restore their sense of justice, often not too overtly. The novels under study portray such women characters whose sense of justice and righteousness is contrived sometime to tickle and nudge the readers leading them to savor the ‘sweet-revenge’ while at others their remorseless and coldblooded confession leaves them awestruck and horrified. In narrative terms, ‘sweet revenge’ names that pattern of getting even in which the victim out-thinks the oppressor and inflicts a punishment so exactly deserved that it strikes the reader as poetic justice. Such plots ordinarily take root where the formal guarantors of justice—the law, the state, the family hierarchy have failed; and even while relishing her triumph, the avenger usually senses the hollowness of the prize and the self-destructive trap concealed within it. The revenge remains ‘sweet’ only so long as the punishment stays proportionate to the offence; the moment it overshoots the mark, the reader’s sympathy curdles and the erstwhile victim hardens into a villain.

Margaret Shanthi, née Paulraj, is one of the six female passengers sharing a female coupe with Akhila, the protagonist of Anita Nair’s *Ladies Coupé*, aboard the Kanyakumari Express. Belonging to different age groups and boarding at various intervals, these women form a unique bond, sharing their innermost thoughts and lived experiences truthfully without anxiety of being judged, given their complete anonymity. Bound for her home in Coimbatore, Margaret boards the train from Bangalore after dropping her husband at a health clinic to manage his body weight and regain control over his life—an annual exercise he must

perform. Then comes her confession: "God didn't make Paulraj a fat man. I did." (Nair, 2001, p. 96) Margaret, going back to the memory lane starts narrating to Akhila, how as a brilliant student of Chemistry with a gold medal in M.Sc, she could have pursued higher studies from America and excelled in life as her parents desired and how swept away by the Ebenezer Paulraj's charismatic persona and mellifluous voice at their chance meeting at Church, changed the direction of her life. A renowned Vice-Principal of a prestigious school with a solidly impeccable family background and Mills and Boons handsomeness seemed a precious catch not only to Margaret but also to her family. Within two months they got married and their honeymoon lasted the whole year and the next till Margaret got pregnant. Sacrificing her talent and idea of doing Ph. D, she did B.Ed. as suggested by her husband and joined in his school as a teacher of Chemistry. She got her long hair shorn after his liking and instead of attending Church services every Sunday, started visiting posh restaurants of his choice without any twinge of guilt or resentment. Their married life was nothing less than a fairy tale in the beginning and no-one as joyful and delighted as she was. The first signs of crack in their blissful relationship, however, starts appearing with Ebenezer's insistence on aborting the 'zygote' against her will and without any remorse it being an anti-Christianity act. He coaxes her saying: "Let's wait till we're both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other. What more do we want?" (Nair, 2001, p.105) Not to displease and hurt her husband, she agrees and undergoes the necessary procedure against her wish. She could never forget how her parents tutored her to be a good and obedient wife to him, and how her share of accountability to maintain the peace and integrity of her married life would be greater than that of her husband. Her father had suggested: "You have to take care of him and take care never to hurt him. He won't be able to bear it if you hurt him" (Nair, 2001).

During this ordeal, Margaret recognizes the bigoted nature of Ebenezer who can't accept any challenge to his authority. Just a week after her abortion, she is further exposed to the still darker side of her husband's personality when he proclaims: "My Darling child...My little darling. My lovely girl. With no big bouncy breasts and horrible woman's bush. I never want you to change. I want you to remain like this all your life." (Nair, 2001) before making passionate love to her. This fervent declaration unveils the real intent behind her forced abortion and raises deeply troubling questions regarding her identity as a woman. She becomes terrified thinking about her husband's reaction when age would start leaving its marks on her body and she would no longer be his 'little girl'. Post-abortion, depression takes over, and the intense guilt of consenting to abort her child begins to gnaw at her. Over the years, her fears prove true, and the fissure in their relationship widens. She finds solace in food, losing her youthful figure, and her husband subsequently dismisses her as "someone of no significance" (Nair, 2001). Moving to Coimbatore, where her husband assumes the principalship of another prestigious school, she becomes nothing more than an

ignored household facilitator, despised by him and pitied by his social circle as a misfortune in the life of the accomplished Ebenezer.

Isolated from her parents-who refuse to understand her plight or provide emotional support-she feels utterly alone as her husband renders her invisible and insults her publicly. Her mother unsympathetically preaches that : “with all... numerous faults, overweight and barren, and given to long morose silences and a melancholic disposition,... [she] ought to go down on ...[her] knees every day and thank the heaven that he,..[her] husband is still stuck by ...[her].”(Nair, 2001) To her parents, he remains a respectable, high-achieving community member who generously tolerates a failed wife. Margaret realizes that social reputation and personal peace are far more important to her parents than her own happiness. She grows full of quiet hatred when her husband dismisses her academic subject, Chemistry, as non-significant and unimaginative in front of guests, and even his flirtatious glances toward other women fail to ignite her jealousy. Recognizing how much she loathes her controlling, manipulative, and hypocritical husband, she finds herself trapped in an insufferable marriage. A sudden insight regarding how to escape this oppressive quagmire dawns upon her following the death of James, one of a pair of goldfish her husband keeps at his bedside. Her husband presumes the fish died of disease or over-eating, but observing the surviving fish, Joyce, floating sleeker and happier, Margaret suspects that Joyce managed to eliminate her partner. This inspires her secret strategy: she decides to tantalize her husband’s taste buds and indulge his ego, declaring that her cooking will now have an explicit purpose.

She weaponizes his love for food as a tool of her revenge and indulging his ego feeds him rich and oily meals. Ebenezer had maintained his physique his entire life with zealous pride, forfeiting food and fasting weekly to maintain his image. So, she has to be patient to execute her sweet revenge and “Almost a year later... The sleek lines began to blur. The breath shortened and the pace slowed. Folds appeared around his neck. A second chin. A belly that jiggled...Ebe slowly became a fat man. A quiet man. An easy man...whose fondness for eating blunted his razor edge.” (Nair, 2001) He became entirely dependent on his wife whom he earlier loathed for her flabby and unattractive body. His desire for food and sex would be satisfied only through her. Earlier merely an adjunct, she became an indispensable part of his life and he became a man with whom she could live once again as she confesses in the very beginning “I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundations of his being. To rid the world of a creature who if allowed to remain the way he was, slim, lithe and arrogant, would continue to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy.” (Nair, 2001) Margaret’s innovative revenge is designed as an emotional mechanism to rebalance her life, regain lost control, and salvage her dignity without inviting public ignominy or legal complications. She is eventually blessed with a daughter and maneuvers a contented married

life, delivering a powerful message that an educated, intelligent woman cannot be treated with casual cruelty indefinitely.

The second notable character whose revenge can be categorized as impulsive and vitriolic is Malathi from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *One Amazing Thing*. Her narrative unfolds when nine diverse characters are trapped by a catastrophic earthquake in the basement of an Indian visa office in the United States. One of the characters, Uma, suggests storytelling as a collective survival strategy to provide cathartic relief and dismantle cultural barriers in the face of impending death. Malathi, an ambitious young consulate employee, is a complex individual caught between her desire for independence and a complicated relationship with her married boss, Mangalam. Back home in India, Malathi had failed her tenth-grade exams twice, prompting her parents to seek a marriage match as the only alternative for a Brahmin girl of her background. She revolted against her family and began working at Miss Lola's Lovely Ladies Salon, where she was initially taken to be groomed for a bridal photograph. Fascinated by her own aesthetic transformation, she decided that instead of being a bride herself, she would "rather be a bride maker" (Divakaruni, 2010). She quickly excels and becomes the most sought-after beauty therapist for the wealthy and haughty Mrs. Vani Balan, the wife of a rich industrialist in Coimbatore, who is routinely accompanied by her docile, young village maid, Nirmala.

The central conflict arises when Mrs. Balan's son, Ravi, returns from America with idealistic notions of philanthropy and a classless society. Ravi establishes a charitable school, Vani Vidyalam, to provide free education, meals, and uniforms to destitute girls, and insists on teaching English to all household servants. While the older servants resist, Nirmala emerges as a highly persistent and intelligent pupil. Gossips begin to circulate, and one evening Mrs. Balan is shocked discovering "Ravi and Nirmala sitting side by side, heads almost touching, his hand guiding hers as she traced letters into her notebook...and she saw Ravi put his arm around the girl and gave her a hug" (Divakaruni, 2010).

Beside herself with rage, Mrs. Balan slaps Nirmala and threatens her, but is stopped by Ravi, who threatens to return permanently to America if Nirmala is dismissed. To defuse the situation and present a deceptive facade of acceptance, Mrs. Balan brings Nirmala to Lola's salon under the pretext of preparing her for a family celebration in Chennai, giving her used silk sarees and a fake ruby set. Malathi treats Nirmala in a private room, sharing the young girl's innocent hopes for a happy future with Ravi. However, Mrs. Balan actively connives to beguile the innocent girl, presenting her to her fifty-year-old, still single womanizer cousin Gopalan, a wealthy hotelier. "Long before Ravi and his father joined the festivities, Nirmala was moved from the servants' quarters to a suite of her own... Her fake jewels were replaced with real ones, her hand-me-down clothes with designer saris...it was clear to his guests that Gopalan had found himself a new girl" (Divakaruni, 2010).

Malathi feels intensely culpable for Nirmala's tragic fate because she failed to see through Mrs. Balan's intrigues and warn her. After achieving her cruel objective, Mrs. Balan returns to Lola's Salon, boasting about her son's new engagement to a wealthy real-estate tycoon's daughter, and demands a private hair treatment from Malathi to make her look youthful and elegant. Viewing this unexpected encounter as a divine sign for retribution, Malathi deliberately applies corrosive chemical mixtures that leave Mrs. Balan partially bald, disfigured, and raving in madness. Though Malathi sways "between terror and exhilaration" (Divakaruni, 2010) and is immediately dismissed from her job, she achieves her revenge. While vengeance can enhance status and frequently "coincides admirably with calculations of expediency", serving a man's financial and political self-interest, female revengers are typically represented negatively by patriarchal structures. (Herman, 1987) The inherent gender bias does not provide a formal agency for women to settle scores on behalf of marginalized friends, yet Malathi takes up cudgels regardless of being labeled monstrous. Warned by Lola that Mrs. Balan's structural power could prove fatal, Malathi flees Coimbatore for Hyderabad, eventually learning English and migrating to America. This forced exile contests the ultimate 'sweetness paradox' of revenge, demonstrating that personal retribution carries heavy, destabilizing consequences.

A far darker manifestation of revenge occurs through the characters of Bhagirathi (Akka), an old, bedridden grandmother, and Varsha, her thirteen-year-old granddaughter, in Anita Rau Badami's novel *Tell It to the Trees*. Settled in an isolated, custom-built home at Merritt's Point, the immigrant family consists of Akka, her authoritarian son Vikram, his second wife Suman, and two children, Varsha and her half-brother Hemant. The novel opens with an investigation into the death of their tenant, Anu Krishnan, whose frozen body is discovered near the house. Akka had shared with Varsha that her late grandfather, "Mr. J.K. Dharma, a small man with a big ego, froze into a pillar of ice right outside our front door when he was forty-seven years old" (Badami, 2011) Anu Krishnan, an old classmate of Vikram, had rented their backyard cottage to focus on creative writing, forging close bonds with Suman and Akka, while Varsha remains highly suspicious and resentful of her presence. Varsha and Hemant frequently spy on Anu and read her personal notebook, discovering that she is documenting their highly dysfunctional family dynamics.

Varsha has been burdened by her abusive, short-tempered father with the absolute responsibility of keeping the family name unblemished and ensuring that Suman never abandons them, as her biological mother Harini had done before dying under highly mysterious circumstances. In this household, family honor is paramount, and children are conditioned to share secrets only with 'trees' to prevent public scandal. Akka tells Varsha that her grandfather deserved to die because he was a chronic drunkard and a stain on the family name,

enjoying the memory of his death: “He was a bastard... He had bad genes... I am delighted he is no longer with us” (Badami, 2011). She recounts with an impish smile how he came home late and highly intoxicated one freezing winter night, and because he could not wake her, turned into an ice sculpture. While the family attempts to project an ideal image, the persistent sounds of domestic violence and hidden physical bruises raise Anu’s deep suspicions. Suman eventually confesses to Anu the severe physical, mental, and emotional abuse she endures from Vikram, alongside her inability to escape due to financial dependence and lack of support from her family in India. Anu promises to assist Suman in escaping this oppressive domestic sphere.

Eavesdropping on this conversation, Varsha experiences a profound survival panic, believing that Anu is going to steal her stepmother and brother, leaving her entirely alone with her brutalizing father. Children of abusive parents frequently grow up inside a rewritten reality, for the abuser denies or re-describes his cruelty until the victim herself comes to accept the blame for her own mistreatment. Varsha’s survival mechanism has created a powerful, trauma-bonded emotional attachment to her abusive father, whose rare moments of affection offer temporary relief. She had already lost an unborn sibling due to her father’s violent nature, yet she remains fiercely protective of him and her half-brother Hemant. Suman and Akka both fear Varsha’s obsessively jealous and possessive streak, which she inherited from her father; even at thirteen, she is remarkably adept at playing malicious mind games. When Akka falls seriously ill and is hospitalized, Vikram leaves the children in Anu’s care for the night. That very night, Anu dies of hypothermia. Suman notices Hemant’s severe trauma and coaxes a confession from him. He reveals that Varsha deliberately turned off all the lights, drew the blinds, and locked Anu outside when she stepped out for a smoke without her keys. Ignoring Anu’s desperate tapping and frantic banging, Varsha dragged her crying brother away, whispering: “Shh, shh, it’s okay Hem, she needs to learn a lesson, that’s all... If anyone asks, just say we were fast asleep” (Badami, 2011).

Suman is utterly stunned by this calculated, cold-blooded murder executed by a young girl who would rather see her stepmother dead or trapped than permit a family scandal. It was Varsha who hid Suman’s passport and engineered a false facade of dependency to manipulate her. Although Suman determines to break free from this psychopathic environment, Varsha remains equally resolved to maintain absolute control over her family, declaring: “I will find a way... I am cunning as the snow. I am sharp as the winter wind. I am strong as Tree. I can find a way. I am Varsha Dharma... This is my house, this is my family” (Badami, 2011). The novel ends on this chilling note, leaving the reader horrified regarding Suman and Hemant’s ultimate fate. Suman loses her allies and is left defenseless against a step-daughter who surpasses her father in unmitigated cruelty and bestiality. While Akka’s historical revenge on her husband is merely hinted at, Varsha’s lethal retaliation against Anu represents an

entirely uncalled-for, unjustified act of personal malice rooted in psychological insecurity. Juby and Farrington emphasize that disturbed and broken family relationships are frequently the earliest breeding grounds of delinquency in children; their 'trauma theory' holds that the loss of a parent wounds the child precisely because it ruptures the deepest bond of attachment, leaving lasting damage upon the child's emotional constitution. (Juby & Farrington, 2001) We may conclude with Francis Bacon's classic warning: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out." Varsha's terrifying path of retribution exemplifies a destructive force that society and the legal order must aggressively weed out, as it is neither sweet nor admissible.

Conclusion

The three novels examined here, read against the epic prototypes of Amba, Draupadi and Shurpanakha, reveal that the revenge of women in Indian women's fiction is less a single motif than a whole spectrum of moral possibilities. At one end stands Margaret Shanthi, whose patient, invisible campaign-waged with cooking oil and flattery rather than sword or writ—rebalances a marriage that neither the Church, nor her parents, nor the law would repair; her retribution is bloodless, proportionate and, within the economy of the narrative, genuinely 'sweet'. Midway stands Malathi, whose corrosive vengeance is exacted not for herself but on behalf of the voiceless Nirmala; impulsive and disfiguring, it gratifies the reader's hunger for poetic justice even as it exiles the avenger, and it demonstrates how heavily a woman must pay for an act that a man of standing might have committed with impunity. At the darkest end stand Akka and Varsha, in whom vengeance has ceased to be an answer to injustice and has curdled into inherited pathology: the grandmother's murderous negligence is handed down to a thirteen-year-old for whom cruelty has become simply the family dialect. Arranged upon this scale, the three narratives disclose the anatomy of the motif itself: revenge in these texts is born where institutions fail; it is executed obliquely because the open channels of redress remain closed to women; it restores agency, dignity and psychological equilibrium to the avenger; and yet it never comes free of cost-guilt, exile, or the perpetuation of the very violence it set out to end.

What finally distinguishes these Indian women novelists is their refusal either to glorify or to flatly condemn their avenging heroines. Nair, Divakaruni and Badami grant their women the full moral status of agents-capable of calculation, of error and of wrong and thereby dismantle the ancient binary that permits women only the two roles of patient sufferer or unnatural monster. Like their epic foremothers, these protagonists convert the so-called weaknesses of their sex—patience, service, tears, the kitchen, the salon chair—into instruments of power. The reader, moreover, is made complicit, we savour Margaret's triumph, flinch at Malathi's chemicals, and recoil from Varsha's snow-cold cunning, and

in doing so we are compelled to ask at what precise point the settling of a score ceases to be justice and becomes a fresh crime. The novels endorse neither Bacon's demand that the law weed out this 'wild justice' nor the avenger's own conviction of righteousness; they suggest, instead, that so long as law, family and society remain deaf to women's injuries, women will go on writing their own verdicts—and that the true indictment lies not against the avenging woman but against the order that leaves her no other court of appeal.

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BOOK REVIEW

Leonie Ansems de Vries (2026). *Politics of exhaustion: border violence and struggles over movement*. Bristol University Press.

Shaista & Naushaba

Politics of Exhaustion: Border Violence and Struggles over Movement by Leonie Ansems de Vries is an intellectually rigorous contribution to scholarship on migration, political theory and border studies. The book entails shifting the concept of the border from episodic violence to infrastructures of sustained attrition. Conceptualizing “exhaustion as politics, violence and struggle, thus enriching existing conceptualizations of violence, of struggle and of politics” (p. 8), the author argues that exhaustion is not only an emotional consequence of migration regimes, but has a calculated effect. And this effect is created and used to control mobility, build and destabilize subjectivities and is subtly undermined by political opposition.

The analytical notion of “governance through exhaustion” underpins the framework presented in this insightful book. Based on detailed ethnographic data collected from Calais, Dunkirk and the United Kingdom’s asylum policy, the author shows that the processes of bordering take various shapes. Not only can bordering be performed by simply enforcing policies, but it can also be achieved through repetition, deferral, dispersal and deprivation. These include the demolition of shelters, denying access to hygiene, preventing humanitarian aid and creating legal insecurity; all of which become tools used in the systematic oppression designed to ensure that survival is only possible through violence. The key theoretical contribution of this book is its ability to weave together the research on slow violence (Rob Nixon), debilitation (Jasbir Puar), and structural/epistemic violence. In the work of Ansems de Vries, these ideas are combined with the emphasis being placed on exhaustion.

Exhaustion is an approach that helps to question border practices and the way they are enforced by states. It cannot be just termed as a means of movement or

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stoppage for migrants, but also entails a sense of exhaustion of psychological, intellectual and emotional capacities of the person on the move. Most importantly, in using the concept of exhaustion, the author does not use exhaustion metaphorically, but instead focuses on empirical evidence of the life of refugees who live with constant uncertainty and hostility from border officials.

What stands out about the book empirically is that it pays particular attention to the informal settlements in northern France. The “Jungle” as it is sometimes called is reconstructed not only as an emergency humanitarian space but also as an intricate socio-spatial space of improvisation, collective existence and precariousness. What French authorities call a ‘zero-anchor point’ approach to dismantling mosques, schools, kitchens and markets emerges in the midst of extreme instability. The systemic thwarting of the formation of durable infrastructure is an example of a shift from territory to environmentalised modes of governance, in which survival is an object of intervention.

The book clearly draws a line between direct and indirect violence, which is a crucial distinction. Police raids and evictions are visible but are interwoven within other more subtle and insidious processes of attrition. This can manifest itself in the withholding of waste collecting services and the criminalisation of aid and the deliberate creation of inhospitable environments. This focus links in with the ongoing debate on ‘slow violence’, though Ansems de Vries takes this analysis further by outlining how exhaustion is a productive political process that fractures solidarities, weakens organisational capacity and forces constant adaptation. The struggle for survival is a day to day aspect of refugeeness. Ansems de Vries poignantly says that “migrant struggles often involve smaller cracks that both disrupt and feed into prevailing orders and epistemologies, that is, migrants become something other than a modern political subject without adding up to a new ‘vision’ of politics” (p. 20.) Among the strengths of the book is its focus on the lack of representation of the migrants in a passive sense. Instead, it centres on relationality, creativity and resistance that emerge within constraints.

Routine activities such as consuming food, engaging in informal learning, watching the sky or creating origami birds are discussed as affective and political practices that continue the subjectivity. In particular, a Sri Lankan torture survivor, Janahan’s story is worth recollecting in which how he spent time in detention, learning origami as he had to spend eight years in legal limbo in the UK before he was granted refugee status. During this period, he learnt it as a hobby which soon became a therapy as it distracted him from his painful experiences (p. 69). While these acts are not an abatement of structural violence, yet they are an expression of the vitality of life in and against structural violence. The focus on temporality: waiting, repetition and interruption bring an

analytical depth, and highlights not only how exhaustion is created geographically but also stretched and distorted in terms of time.

The work is methodologically distinctive. Participatory and collaborative methodology used by Ansems de Vries is the kind that dismantles hierarchical relations inherent in knowledge production. It may be noted that using such techniques as photographic and filming practices, walking interviews and storytelling projects is considered an innovative approach to knowledge creation. The reference to the “Migrant Voices” program and collaboration with the Migration Museum in London offers another illustration of how the concept of representation can also be fraught, particularly from the perspectives of ethics related to visibility, vulnerability and agency. The author is mindful of the ambivalence of these approaches, since they may free participants to act effectively, but they can also put them at risk in unfavourable political settings.

The book is a welcome intervention in the engagement between the repressive contemporary border regime and longer histories of colonialism, racialisation and dispossession. Migration control is embedded in a broader landscape of inequality that is characterized by uneven migration and a highly racialized landscape of migration. For example, the UK’s Windrush scandal is an example of the illegality that can be manufactured within systems of documentation/bureaucracy for people who have long legal residency. In this place, exhaustion is created through administrative repetition as well as evidence requirements and suspicion of the institutions. This results in a state violence that is as much about paperwork.

Another significant aspect of the book is its focus on disability studies and ableism, which remains an understudied aspect of structural violence (p.101). Building on the work of Erevelles and Minear, the author demonstrates the interactions between migration regimes and austerity politics in the creation of “excess” populations considered unproductive or a burden. This exhaustion is then redefined as both a physical state and a normative evaluation of whose lives are considered sustainable or valuable. The intersectional analysis that further develops the critique of current governance also exposes assumptions about productivity, ability and value that can be found in it.

Theoretically, the book tries to bring out the connections between affect, materiality and geopolitics in a highly ambitious fashion. While exhaustion affects not only the bodies but also goes around in infrastructures, institutions and environment. For example, the process by which Calais was turned into a “renatured” bird preserve should not be viewed as one of restoration but of erasure, as the migrants’ history is erased from the scene. In this ecologizing of border governance, which the author calls ‘eco-coloniality,’ bordering activities are capable of penetrating beyond space and into environmental management and landscape production.

The book is analytically dense. But this does not diminish its lucidity of ethnographic encounters that highlight analytical claims. The emotional dimension of living in precarity is demonstrated in the depictions of communal dining and undirected interaction. And Ansems de Vries is right in underlining “the political significance of everyday practices that bring people together and foster affective relations and communities of solidarity, friendship and care, as well as the importance of play, to counter the politics of exhaustion” (p. 114) . This ensures that the discussion does not become purely theoretical, but remains connected with people’s everyday reality. But it is also a source of certain tension for the book’s broad theoretical coverage. The connection between slow violence, post-colonial theory, disability studies, affect theory and participatory methodology can sometimes become too theoretical. However, this may also be its greatest strength since a wider scope allows one to grasp the complexity of the process under study. As Ansems de Vries convincingly shows, exhaustion is not something that can be comprehended under one discipline.

Politics of Exhaustion is a significant addition to current scholarship in the fields of borders and migration. It re-focuses the conversation from exaggerated acts of violence and instead focuses on the gradual and silent ways in which life can be controlled and degraded. In conceptualizing exhaustion as a mode of governance and place of struggle, Ansems de Vries opens new lines of thinking about resistance, endurance and relational life in the context of inequality. The book is both theoretically sophisticated and empirically robust and also morally committed.



T.V. Paul (Ed.). (2019). *The China-India rivalry in the globalisation era*. Orient BlackSwan, 2019. xi + 351.

Harish K. Thakur

China and India, as the Maddison tables projected, are the two new emerging global actors who ascend steadfastly as economic powers not only in Asia but across the continents. Their mutual relationships are likely to impact and determine the twenty-first-century international order. Since the two great powers continue to redefine the strategic landscape across the continents through their growth stories, economic expansion, military modernization, technological competition, and competing future visions, their mutual relations marred with distrust and confrontations at times become an area of investigation for the scholars and policymakers alike. In this background the edited volume of T. V. Paul, *The China-India rivalry in the globalisation era* (2019) (after Garver, 2009), offers an interesting, theoretically rigorous and empirically rich examinations of China-India relations available in twenty-first century. Since the volume offers some important insights and theoretical points to understand the complex Sino-Indian relations, its review could be helpful to the foreign policy students and scholars. The volume presents twelve chapters by the scholars of international relations, security studies, and Asian politics. The study transcends conventional descriptive accounts and offers a sophisticated analytical framework for understanding why rivalry between India and China continues despite deepening economic interdependence and increasing participation in global governance institutions.

The chief contribution of the volume lies in its narrative of existent positives in the domains of economics, climate change, global financial reforms and trade against the conventional war polemic and consistent conflict-ridden descriptions. According to T.V. Paul India-China ties imply a “managed rivalry” characterized neither by persistent hostility or genuine strategic partnership evolution. The continued rivalry, however, gets softened by several factors like trade, economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, institutional engagement, and diplomatic pragmatism. The volume offers an intermediary buffer that mitigates the recalcitrance of conflict and war and offers liberalist view of market, globalization and trade diminishing the geopolitical competition.

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The volume has been thoughtfully organized into five thematic sections – Introduction, Sources, Strategies, Mitigators and Conclusions that explore the sources of rivalry, strategic interactions, and factors that moderate competition. According to Paul with the Chinese expansion into South China Sea and Indian Ocean a new rivalry between China and India takes shape. However, it is limited or managed rivalry and “has remained less intense than the India-Pakistan rivalry due to several mitigating variables, ranging from economic to diplomatic factors. Among these factors is the growing asymmetrical economic interdependence between India and China (p.5). This power asymmetry has forced India not to harden its posture on issues of territory, water and imbalance in trade, holds Paul. However, the Indian reluctance to turn hard is more due to its overdependence on China for supply of several important items, which have poor supply chain alternatives,

By adopting a multidimensional analytical framework, the volume makes a significant scholarly contribution, convincingly demonstrating that the China–India rivalry cannot be reduced to the Himalayan border dispute but instead represents a comprehensive geopolitical contest shaped by competing strategic interests across multiple domains. Instead of focussing on the traditional territorial conflict the volume offers new insights into the multi-layered dimensions of conflict and contestations between the two states. It discusses the strategic competition between them in Asia, South Asia and the oceans, territorial claims, great power ambitious, their visible power asymmetries, competing views of international order, resource competition, strategic culture, and military balancing.

Mahesh Shankar in “Territory and the China-India Competition”, observes that while India’s territorial dispute with China is different from that it has with Pakistan, Tibet has added another dimension to the dispute. Nehru, in order to assuage China not only reconciled with Tibetan occupation with China but also compromised with China through 1954 Panchsheel agreement. Indian concern for territory focussed more on the Eastern Sector around McMahon Line than on the disputed Western Sector of Ladakh. India’s ‘forward policy’ of 1961, unaccompanied by required military strength caused it the 1962 loss. According to Shankar, “what is notable, nevertheless, about China-India relationship is that as the vector along which the two sides compete have expanded, the territorial aspect has become ostensibly less important” (47). In the aftermath of Doklam, the role of ‘robust management mechanism’ to help diplomatically de-escalate their tensions in future would be indispensable.

Equally impressive is Xiaoyu Pu’s chapter “Asymmetrical Competitors” on the status of China-India rivalry. Pu argues that status aspirations constitute an independent source of rivalry between the two states beyond a traditional narrative centred on material capabilities. “According to power transition theory, the onset of war between a dominant and a rising power grows more likely as the gap in relative strength between them narrows and the latter’s grievances

against the existing order move beyond any hope of peaceful resolution” (70). Both the powers wish to get recognition as major powers with legitimate claims to leadership in regions, continent and the wider international system. As a result, the global governance structures like United Nations, UNSC and regional organisations and economic forums become the zones for strategic competition. Therefore, the search for prestige and recognition introduces valuable constructivist insights into an otherwise predominantly realist discourse.

Manjari Chatterjee Miller’s chapter “China India and their differing conceptions about international order”, further deepens the theoretical sophistication of the volume by examining divergent conceptions of international order. While trade ties bind them together India is paranoid about China, especially regarding its South Asian activities. “India perceives bilateral relationship as a rivalry and remains extremely wary and suspicious of China” (94). The author forcefully argues that both the states have fundamentally different understandings of sovereignty, hierarchy, regional leadership, and global governance. It is because of these ideational constructions that the two states cooperate at platforms like BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) frequently and at the same time keep the strategic suspicion alive. An interesting part of the chapter is a discussion over the Chinese approach to international system which hinges upon its idea of “Middle Kingdom” (Zhongguo) and Indian view of the world represented by ‘Gandhism’, ‘Nehruism’, ‘Hindutva’ and ‘Neo-liberal Globalism’. The recent Modi government’s approach speaks more of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ and has less active role for Indian leadership in the world. The chapter ‘Balancing Strategies and the China-India Rivalry’ by Zhen Han Jean-Francois Belanges argues that the territorial disputes may cause rivalries among states but they are not the sole reason, and there could be other potential factors behind. The India China rivalry reflects three kinds of balancing- hard balancing, limited-hard balancing and soft balancing (118). In the post-cold war era while India has found new strategic partners in the US and Japan, China’s BRI and CPEC also places it in a dominant position. China and India are not following hard balancing strategies too much and continue to follow limited-hard balancing and soft-balancing to keep the differences at the backseat.

The chapter ‘China and India’s Quest for Resources and Its Impact on the Rivalry’ by Calvin Chen enters an interdisciplinary engagement with non-traditional dimensions of security. Calvin focuses on China India rivalry in the Africa and Central Asia and believes that the two state might clash over resources in future. China and India have developed enormously in the last few decades and the two will continue to vie for power, dominance and energy in the coming times. Selina Ho in ‘Power Asymmetry and the China-India Water Dispute’ examines the transboundary water disputes between the two and explains how environmental security, energy access, and resource governance

increasingly shape their relations. The waters of Himalayas are inevitable sources for both the states and there is every possibility that they can dispute over these sources in future. The two states have to stabilise their riparian relations and upgrade their current MoU based cooperation to a higher level of institutionalisation which may bring greater stability in their relations.

Andrew Scobell in “Strategic Culture and the China–India Rivalry” (chapter 8) argues that the strategic rivalry between the two states is deeply ingrained in their distinct strategic cultures, historical experiences, and security perceptions. They have a long enduring mistrust, differing geopolitical aspirations, and divergent threat assessments that sustain the rivalry, suggesting that strategic culture remains a critical lens for understanding bilateral behaviour beyond material power and economic interdependence. According to Scobell ‘China India confront each other in a ‘Himalayan Standoff’. In contrast to the better-known ‘Mexican standoff’ in a Hollywood Western, Beijing and New Delhi confront a chronic, long-term condition, rather than an acute, short term crisis situation” (201). Scobell also discusses the two faces-of China and India and how the people and elites of the two states view each other. In ‘Nuclear Deterrence in the China-India Dyad’, Vipin Narang observes that India’s nuclear threat is most likely from Pakistan, for China India is a nuclear after-thought as it sees the US posture as a major threat. The two states are responsible states and have secure second-strike capabilities, which further lessens the chance of nuclear escalation.

In part IV, Mathew A. Castle in “Globalisation’s Impact: Trade and Investment in China India Relations” observes how the increased trade between China and India can mitigate their strategic rivalry and competition. However, the increased exports of China to India brings more asymmetry in their relations further compounded by the far expanding China’s BRI project. Feng Liu in “China-India Engagement in Institutions” argues that since sharing of responsibilities by global powers determine the international governance system, a shift in the role of traditional players to the new emerging powers like China and India would impact the nature of global governance. “While some enduring conflicts and contradictions between China and India are irreconcilable in short term, cooperation based on common interests is still dominant aspect of China-India relations. The two Asian powers share common interests in improving their status and influence in the post-American world order, and they are willing to take similar positions to achieve this objective” (300). It is impossible, holds Liu to to have cooperation without compromise, and while China-India cooperation has much potential, unresolved issues constrain their bilateral relations.

In the concluding chapter, “Whither Rivalry or Withered Rivalry?”, Paul F. Diehl considers the China–India ties as marked by an enduring rivalry without a decline. While globalization accompanied by trade expansion, institutional engagement, and economic interdependence which significantly moderate open

conflicts, the two states have failed to eliminate the fundamental sources of rivalry and competition. Diehl concludes that the rivalry is likely to persist in a managed form, characterized by simultaneous competition and cooperation, with globalization acting as a constraint on escalation rather than a solution to the underlying conflict. “The China India rivalry is not as severe as it once was, this doesn’t mean that relations will continue to improve or that the decline in hostility is permanent” (329). However, the volume precedes the Galwan episode that transformed the opinion of many about China’s strategy towards India and South Asia. In the new emergent situation with the US withdrawal from 66 organisations the legitimacy crisis of existing global institutions may be exacerbated and strengthen arguments for an alternative model of global governance. China’s focus on the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the International Organisation for Media on (IOMed) are the attempt at raising parallel governance Frameworks (Thakur, 2025). The recent fall of relations with China owes to several factors, like China’s ‘go global mission,’ global power ambition, India standing as a hurdle in its BRI project, the revival of QUAD, the Indo-US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) 2017 and Indo-US dynamics over the Indo-Pacific (Thakur, 2024). The developments reminisce one of the words of Stephan P. Cohen (2000), “India is not a great power in the classic sense; it cannot challenge American military or economic strength. But in a transformed international order, its assets and resources are more relevant to a wide range of American interests than they have been for 50 years. They cannot be safely ignored in the future, as they have been in the past” (Thakur, 2023). And so does it weigh for China.

The volume is equally successful in integrating strategic and military perspectives. Discussions of balancing behaviour, strategic culture, and nuclear deterrence reveal the complexities of security interactions under conditions of pronounced power asymmetry. Contributors reject simplistic balancing models by demonstrating that India’s strategy combines internal military modernization, selective external partnerships, economic engagement, and diplomatic hedging. China’s approach similarly reflects a calibrated strategy that balances competition with efforts to avoid unnecessary escalation. This nuanced treatment offers an important corrective to binary portrayals of either confrontation or accommodation.

The edited volume, methodologically represents an interesting collaborative scholarship maintaining remarkable coherence and focus on the central proposition that globalization has transformed, mitigated, but not eliminated the great-power rivalry. The theoretical consistency distinguishes the book from many edited collections that often suffer from conceptual fragmentation. In the post-2020 Galwan Valley episode the ties between India and China surely demonstrates that the ‘managed rivalry’ framework remains relevant. Although political and military relations deteriorated sharply the economic

interdependence, after initial Indian ban on Chinese items, have proved remarkably resilient. Bilateral trade has again risen to US\$156 billion in 2025, which shows that there exists a spirit of ‘competitive coexistence’ and policy of ‘managed strategic rivalry’ that balance the political journey of two states.

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